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Vol. I. { SINGLE NUMBER. }

FRANK TOUSEY, PUBLISHER,
180 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y.

{ PRICE }
5 CENTS.

No. 335.

The Hunters of the Silver Trail.

(Continued from Wide Awake Library, No. 334.)



Their attention was chained by Bloody Tordas. His arm still remained aloft with the knife clinched in the hand, but was not so steady now.

CHAPTER I.

BEWITCHED BY THE MAID WITH GOLDEN HAIR.

"AM I dreaming, or is that a being of this world upon whom my eyes rest? How gloriously beautiful she is. I can feel some responsive chord touched in my heart that has never thrilled at the sight of any of her sex before. It must be the same face I caught a glimpse of upon the ledge. They call her the Prairie Witch, and it must be so, for already she has cast her meshes about my heart. I dared everything for the sake of securing the precious metal that lies

around me, but now, oh, treacherous Roger Warden, you would give all your hopes and chances if you could win that peerless creature to love you. Sitting here I am in Paradise. Let me feast my soul by gazing on that lovely face longer."

The speaker was our young American adventurer, and he stood in the old Spanish silver mine. Around him there lay fabulous fortunes; the precious metal glittered in every rock, and the wildest dream of the craziest silver hunter might have been realized in this place, where one could imagine a second Midas had touched

the rocks, the trees, the bushes, for everything shone with a frosty whiteness in the moon's limpid light.

The young man had taken advantage of the confusion created among the guerrillas by the timely arrow that pierced the arm of Bloody Tordas, and had made off in the surrounding darkness, so that when the guerrilla thought to look for him he was not to be found.

Roger Warden was not alone in the mountains. A well-loved companion from Boston, together with a train of pack-mules, and three trusty muleteers who could fight like demons if

the time came for it, were in a canyon not far away, whom we will become acquainted with in due time.

The picture upon which the young man gazed was enough to thrill the heart of any one who possessed as ardent a love for the beautiful as he did.

A young girl was seated on a silver-encrusted rock, gazing in a meditative manner upon a tiny streamlet that washed the rock at her feet, its pellucid waters betaking to themselves in the moonlight the color of their surroundings, and looking for all the world like molten silver.

She was dressed in the most picturesque garments imaginable. They were partly Indian, but surely the red cloak that hung from her shoulders must have come from some civilized community.

She sighed deeply, as if some recollection was busy in her thoughts. Before he knew what he was doing, Roger Warden had also heaved a responsive sigh.

The maiden started and looked around her. Roger was standing directly where the moonlight could fall upon him, and although his instinct, and the fear of frightening her would have warned him to retreat, there was no time given for such a movement.

He saw her leap to her feet, and with clasped hands look directly at him. For his life he could not have moved a hand or a foot. They stood there for almost half a minute.

"Jack—oh, Jack!"

If admiration had kept our hero motionless before, amazement and delight certainly performed the same kind office for him now.

The words were spoken by the fair maiden in a sort of ecstatic whisper. She had stood poised upon one foot, as if ready either to advance or retreat. Something must have given her wonderful courage suddenly, for she ran lightly forward.

A pair of white arms were thrown around Roger's neck. Was he dreaming? He had read of the sirens of the sea, how they lured unfortunate sailors to their doom. What did it all mean?

"Jack—dear Jack! oh, I am so glad to see you! but you have been a long time coming, dear Jack. Won't you kiss your own little Florence, now that you have found her?"

Great Vishnu! would he?

He did it, too, and went through with it so bravely that the operation must needs be repeated several times. Perhaps he ought to have been shot, but for all that those were the sweetest kisses he ever had in all his life.

"Who the devil is this 'dear Jack?'" he thought, almost aloud, as the young girl hid her face on his shoulder, while her little form seemed to tremble with some great emotion; "if he is a rival of mine, I'll poison him or fight a duel so as to get him out of the way, for after this, if we live, this girl is going to be Mrs. Warden. No man shall take her from me now."

The golden-haired girl seemed to wonder why "dear Jack" did not speak to her, for she looked up from his shoulder, the tear-drops still shining on her eye-lashes.

"Dear Jack, why don't you say something; why—"

She paused and seemed to look a little afraid, as though the truth was dawning upon her mind. Roger would have been "dear Jack" or any other man she wanted just then, but truth compelled him to confess his dereliction. His hand fell from her waist.

"Miss Florence, I am not Jack."

She sprang from him instantly, her large blue eyes full of wonder.

"Not Jack?" she repeated.

"Candor compels me to say so;" and Roger removed the felt hat that shaded his face.

The moonbeams fell full upon it, and revealed a countenance that would have been a sure passport into the confidence and regard of the little lady, only for the strange

manner of their meeting. His arm had been around her; she had kissed him. Forget that? Never.

Her blue eyes flashed with indignation and anger. Her attitude was that of an insulted queen. Roger's heart fluttered as though something was playing sad havoc with it.

In the defective moonlight he did look wonderfully like Jack Crawford, and the mistake of the little Prairie Witch was natural. How her eyes did look the scorn she felt. Poor Roger—elated one minute, crushed the next.

"How dare you touch me? I saved you from those Mexicans thinking you were dear Jack, and this is the base manner in which you repay me. You shall pay dearly for it, though. There are those near by who guard the Fire Witch, and this insult shall cost you dear."

No sooner had she spoken these words than she raised a tiny whistle to her lips and blew a shrill call that rang out loud and clear upon the night air.

Roger sprang back, not knowing what to make of this new phase in the game. His eyes were glued upon the face of the young girl, and he saw that she was really angry, which served to increase his respect for her, even if it did pique his vanity.

"I assure you I had no intention of insulting you. I could not prevent your putting your arms around my neck, and when you asked me to kiss you, it would have taken an angel from Heaven to have prevented me, and if I ever have the chance again—"

"Silence, you wretch! you base deceiver! There, now I hope you will get your just deserts. Run, quick, they are coming!"

Oh, woman, variable as the shade made by the quivering aspen. She had commenced her words with a stamp of anger, and ended with an entreaty.

Roger stood lost in amazement. Rapid footsteps sounded behind him, and he had only time to turn, when three huge Apache braves threw themselves upon him.

He was a born athlete, and taking in the situation at once, saw that to even attempt to draw his revolvers would be folly, when his clenched fist was dashed into the face of the nearest warrior; the fellow doubled up as though suddenly taken with the cramp, and no more trouble need be expected from that source.

It was a wild wrestle with the other two, but superior numbers conquered, and Roger found himself a prisoner, standing face to face with the Snake Devil of the Apaches, whose body seemed alive with the terrible reptiles.

The fair Prairie Witch stood near by, her hands clasped, and a look of sorrow on her face. Roger surveyed her disdainfully.

"This is how you treat those who would be your friends. You have given me over to the tender mercies of this old snake heathen, and I suppose I'm as good as a dead man. That must have been a Judas kiss you gave me. At any rate I pay for it with my life, and yet, were it possible, I would be willing to buy another at the same price. You look sorry; I forgive you. Farewell; this is my death march."

CHAPTER II.

PEDRO, THE SNAKE-CHARMER.

"DEMONIO! what terrible place is this we have stumbled on? I would not pass into that den for all the money in the world. See how they crawl! Ugh! it makes my blood run cold."

General Cortinas was right in what he said; it was a sight well calculated to make the blood run cold in the veins of any man. Hundreds of rattlesnakes crawling over each other, twisting, squirming, hissing and coiling up into knots.

No wonder the band of adventurers came to a sudden halt, not daring to advance another step. After witnessing the terrible death of the man upon whom the

Apache had dropped his pet, they were apt to have a healthy respect for anything bordering on the rattlesnake line.

They had gone some distance into the passage that led from the ledge, before they came upon this den of vipers. They had evidently been let into the passage from some side cave where the rocks were slimy, and a more effective means of preventing pursuit could not have been adopted by the Apaches.

Just beyond, the floor of the passage arose abruptly several feet, so that none of the twisting, hissing reptiles could escape in that direction. Spellbound then, the Mexicans gazed upon this barrier that had been placed so effectually upon their further progress.

To carry one across the den would require a clear leap of twenty feet or more, and the most agile among the silver seekers would not have attempted it for any price. A slip, and then a terrible death in that hot-bed of poison.

Cortinas was fast becoming furious.

"*Carajo!*" he exclaimed, "is this to be the end of our search? So near the goal and balked now? We, the bold chevaliers who feared no foe, turned back in the moment of victory? Perish the thought. Where is Pedro? He has boasted of his power over the reptiles, and now by St. Catharine, he shall prove his words true or perish like a miserable liar."

"I am here, general, ready to prove them true. Lend me your sword, and in half an hour I will have every reptile slain," said the snake-charmer, advancing boldly.

"It is too long to wait; have you no method of otherwise getting rid of them?" demanded Cortinas, brightening up at this chance of seeing a rift in the clouds that overhung them.

"*Sí, señor.* In five minutes you will be able to pass among them safely."

They watched the actions of the snake-charmer with no little curiosity. He took from a little satchel a handful of grey powder with which he walked toward the reptiles, who greeted his coming with a terrible hissing.

Pedro walked into their midst with a coolness that was surprising. Several were fastened on to his legs, but he wore heavy leather breeches through which their fangs could not penetrate, and even if they had, Pedro's body was saturated with the preventive against their virus that gave him his greatest power among the horrible reptiles.

This grey powder he scattered about him with some strange incantations merely intended to influence the lookers-on with a sense of his greatness in this line. Before two minutes had passed by there was a visible effect upon the reptiles.

The hissing and wriggling grew less violent, and the eyes that had gleamed so venomously lost much of their bead-like glitter. Presently the crested heads began to fall back.

In three minutes those in the immediate vicinity of the charmer seemed listless. Pedro now began playing upon a reed flute that produced soft sounds. Some of the snakes moved restlessly.

When four minutes had passed by, a portion of the dreadful reptiles lay just as they had fallen, in a comatose state. By the time the limited five minutes had expired, there was not a movement among the rattlesnakes. All of them had succumbed to Pedro's charming, although the mysterious grey powder was at the bottom of the secret.

It was a strange spectacle to see the dark-skinned Mexico standing in the midst of those lifeless reptiles—for they were deprived of all motion for the time being.

"Now, señor, you can cross."

But Cortinas would not trust himself, for one of the serpents might spring into life with the pressure of a human foot, and sink his fangs into the flesh of the unlucky wretch who had trodden upon him.

He gave Pedro instructions to clear the path with the stick one of the men carried, which the snake-charmer did.

They did not mince steps in passing through this narrow alleyway, with the deadly reptiles lying in heaps on each side of them.

The whole body of silver seekers had now passed over, and stood upon the elevated rock on the other side.

"*Carramba!* how long will they remain in this stupor?" demanded Cortinas.

"Perhaps ten minutes, an hour, a day; I cannot tell. The charm effects every snake as you see, but not all of them alike. I shall have to repeat it when we return," answered the snake-charmer.

What would they do if anything should happen to him? This was the question that arose in many minds, and Pedro was likely to be well looked after in times of danger.

The forward movement was resumed, and as they went the passage changed in its construction. Often the light from the torch was reflected from the walls in bright lines, and these, upon closer inspection, proved to be veins of silver.

When this became evident, the men trembled with anticipation and eagerness, for it really seemed as if the fabulous stories they had heard in connection with this lost mine, and which had appeared almost incredible before, might, after all, be realized.

While they were thinking thus, it was discovered that a short distance ahead of them it was no longer dark, and upon extinguishing their torches they ascertained that the mouth of the passage really lay before them. They were looking through this opening upon the moonlit scene without.

Was this the valley of silver?

Every man's heart seemed to stand still with suspense, and during that minute all the wildest fancies that a distorted brain could conjure up, came trooping before their minds' eyes. Then the harsh voice of Cortinas was heard:

"Yonder lies our goal. Forward, my brave boys, and take possession of the silver valley of the old monk's parchment scroll, in the name of Dare-Devil Cortinas."

Then came a cheer and a yell from the silver-seekers such as had never before been heard between those walls.

Hardly had the sound died away than there came a sudden rush of air. You have felt the concussion when a large cannon was fired close by. Such it was with them, only a hundred fold more severe.

Such was the mighty power of this concussion, that it sent every man of them heels over head like a row of cards set up to be blown down. As they fell prostrate upon the rocks, their ears were saluted with a most terrific explosion such as human beings had seldom listened to before and lived.

The very mountain seemed to quake and quiver as though shaken to its foundations, and pieces of silver laden rock, loosened from the sides of the passage, fell among the prostrate men.

On the heels of the first explosion there came a second, more distant, and less powerful, but of equally terrific force. Then all was quiet.

Were the men dead?

One of them staggered to his feet. It was the valiant Cortinas, and such was the shock sustained by his nerves that he staggered like a drunken man. The grit had not been shaken from his body, however, and he proceeded to fan the still smouldering end of the torch he held into a flame, by whirling it around his head several times.

The prostrate men began to recover their senses. One had been killed by a flying rock, several wounded by the heavy stones that fell, and all rendered more or less motionless by the rude shock.

They gathered around their undaunted chieftain, who was rapidly recovering the nerve that usually distinguished him.

"*Cospita!* what an earthquake," said one worthy, binding up his bruised arm.

"Earthquakes do not happen like that, you fool. Smell

the air, and if you have ever fired a gun, you can tell burnt powder. I would it were an earthquake; it is something worse," grated Cortinas between his teeth.

"Wcrse! burnt powder! Carramba! what mean you, hombre?" asked one war-scarred veteran, who had been with Cortinas in many a desperate battle, but who had now been so badly shaken up that he was as scared as the rest.

"This: there has been an explosion in front. The light can be seen no longer, so our passage is barred. There was a second explosion behind us, beyond the large cavern. It is the opinion of Cortinas that we are buried alive in this hole, and may the Virgin forgive us our sins if we are."

These words from Cortinas, the man who had never as yet blanched at any danger. No wonder an icy chill ran over the frames of the silver seekers; no wonder the torches trembled in the hands of those who moved toward the place where the opening had been.

It was now filled with a mass of rocks, such as the power of a Hercules could not remove, without a loophole of escape.

From this uninviting spectacle, the Mexicans, led by Tender-hearted Mose and his companions, rushed back through the passage to where it widened and formed the circular cavern whose roof they could not see by torch-light.

Where the passage had been that led to the snake's den, was a heap of rubbish even greater than the other. Huge rocks weighing tons blocked their progress effectually in either direction. Around them was a chaotic pile of fallen stones, many of them rich with silver.

The treasure seekers looked in each other's faces with distended eyes, and tanned cheeks blanched with the horrors that came before them when they realized that they were entombed alive.

CHAPTER III.

COON-TAIL BOB, THE SIMOON FROM THE DESERT.

It was the intention of Coon-tail Bob to pursue the four miscreants who had fled from the camp, as far among the mountains as they dared go in the darkness.

With Yellow Fang, his savage canine friend, he would have chased them near and far, until the end came, had not Colonel Crawford, who hurried after the excited pair as fast as he possibly could, persuaded the hot-blooded ranger to delay his vengeance until another and more fitting opportunity.

The two friends had just reached the spot where the hunter's horse had been left, having picketed the animal before advancing upon the camp of those whom he knew to be his deadly enemies—when the soldier in narrating his adventure among the pirates, happened to mention the coroner.

Immediately Coon-tail Bob was all excitement. This man had murdered his only brother, and he had been on the lookout for him, many months back.

In a few sentences he explained this to the colonel, and then, whistling to his dog, bounded away in the direction of the camp-fire, so that Crawford, being unable to stop him just then, was compelled to throw his bridle over a limb, and follow in the track of the hunter.

Coon-tail Bob was length induced to forego his immediate quest for the murderer of his brother. He would be apt to come across him somewhere in the vicinity, as these men had been hired to put the colonel out of the way, and had actually followed him to this wild country to win the five hundred golden onzas that had been promised them.

Who this terrible enemy of Jack Crawford's was, and why the life of the soldier was sought, will be made manifest as our story progresses, and in a manner dramatic enough to please the most exacting.

Once more the deserted camp-fire was gained. Here the yellow wolf-dog snuffed around, and lifting his head, howled dismally. Coon-tail Bob eyed this proceeding with no little interest.

"He smells the critter, does Yellow Fang. Months ago I got him accustomed to the coroner's old cloes, an' he'll never forgit it. Why on the ternal airth didn't I take the dorg when I crept up to hear what war goin' on at the fire? He'd have nailed the varmint sure. Ye see I have sharpened his teeth on purpose to tear the neck o' that cussed coroner. He an' Yellow Fang will yet make an intimate acquaintance. Now, kurnel, let's ride anywhar ye will. But, jehosophat, looky thar, the perairie air afire yonder away. Some ternal Injun deviltry in that."

"See, what do those fires mean on the mountain yonder? I have been watching them while you were speaking. This way; look between the trees. Three tall pyramids of flame."

"Great Heavens! it's the fire signal for the Apaches. I've seen it go once afore, an' in ten hours thar war nigh on a thousand o' the whelps a rampin' an' ragin' around. We lost some o' our best boys on that occasion, and they liked to have gobbled us up *in toto*. What if all means I cannot say. Thet perairie fire and the fire signal have something in common, but it are a mystery to me."

They sat on their horses and watched the two points of interest. The fires on the lofty mountain peak shot their livid tongues upward like columns. Upon the prairie a good spectacle was presented to their view, for with each succeeding second the flames arose in mightier billows as if endeavoring to lick the Heavens.

"My God!" cried the colonel, suddenly, "look ahead of the fire! Surely those cannot be human beings."

"They air fur a fact. I kin only git an occasional glimpse o' them through the fire an' smoke, but they look mighty like hunters. Hark, hear that Injun yell faintly. Thet tells the hull story. Thort I heard distant shootin' as I rode along. Thar's sumpin goin' on over yonder thet we had better look inter. Let's move thet way and I'll tell you the news I hev, kurnel. Jehosophat, see the fire leap that *barranca* then, just like a hoss."

Slowly the two men rode along the foot of the mountains in the very direction whence the fire had started. As they went they conversed in low tones, and Coon-tail Bob imparted some information that "knocked the kurnel on his beam ends," as the wild-cat hunter expressed it.

It concerned a woman.

What ever did happen in this world of ours from the time of Adam and Eve, down to the present day, but what a woman was connected with it in some way.

"Thar's another lively little scrimmage which shows the hunters got to the *barranca* afore the fire caught 'em," said Coon-tail Bob, as the disturbance upon the burned prairie came to their ears.

All was silent again, and they rode slowly forward. They could now see the camp-fire of the Indians glimmering among the trees beyond them. By the time they reached the mouth of the canyon, the bright face of the moon was peeping above the eastern horizon, and throwing her slanting rays over the prairie.

"What had we better do now?" asked the colonel, as they sat looking over to where the camp-fire glimmered.

"Reckon one o' us had better take a scout over yonder, and see what's what. I'm dead sartin o' what I told ye, an' when it comes——"

Coon-tail Bob's further utterance was prevented by the alarm at the Indian camp.

"What in the name o' the old Harry does that mean?" said the hunter, wonderingly, as the neighs of the horses, shouts of the scalp-hunters, and excited yells of the astonished red men reached their ears.

"Give it up; ask me something easy, old friend," declared the soldier, tersely.

Soon the racket died away in part, for the sound of human voices could no longer be heard. In the place of them they caught the heavy thumping of horses' hoofs.

"Ther coming this way, an' too steady for runaways. Them thet ye hear away out yonder are loose, I reckon, but these hyar are inhabited I'd like to bet," affirmed Bob.

"What would you make of it?"

"Jest this. Thar's four o' them critters if I git the stamp right, an' each one o' 'em has got a white rider on his back. Them hunters we saw chased by the fire, an' heard arterward a fightin' the pesky reds in the dark out on the perairie, hev run away wid mounts, an' stamped the rest o' the hosses. They're the boss, I reckon, and I say we make up to 'em like a gal does to her lovyer."

"You know best, Bob; I leave it in your hands. All that I want is to rescue my sister from the captivity in which she has been held so long, and evade the murderous designs of—you know whom, I cannot bear to speak the treacherous name. There, you can see them now; four, just as you affirmed."

The trees had lost many of their leaves, and the moonlight, filtered through the branches, lay upon the ground in fantastic shapes.

Through the timber four horsemen were coming at a swinging gallop. The nature of their course prevented riding abreast, so they were strung out in Indian file. As they drew rapidly closer the colonel and his ally could readily see that all of the riders wore buckskin. The last almost seemed like a monkey, he was so small, and clung to his horse so nimbly.

"Mexican Mose, ahoy!"

The four men came to a halt as this hail reached their ears, and Coon-tail Bob, followed by the colonel, rode toward them. When they drew near enough for the hunter with the coon-tails to be recognized, he was warmly greeted.

"Blue Bill, you have not forgotten me, I hope?" said a quiet voice.

The ranger dropped Bob's hand, and turned like a flash. "Who spoke? Surely that was the voice of the dead, the voice of gallant Jack Crawford of the — th, whom I saw struck down in the fight at Big Timber. Alive! Heaven knows how glad I am to see you, Jack, old boy," and the earnest hand-clasp spoke even more than words could have done.

They rode onward up the canyon.

The shouts of the Apaches could occasionally be heard as they hunted for their steeds upon the prairie so lately swept by the fierce flames, but these died away as the hunters left the camp further in their rear, and plunged deeper into the mountains.

Now and then some point was reached that gave them a cursory glance at the level land, but the moonlight seemed to interpose a filmy curtain between, and objects could be seen in but a vague manner if at all.

All matters were speedily explained between the friends. Blue Bill learned how the gallant soldier had escaped from the disastrous fight at Big Timbers, and his present mission to the wilds of Arizona. In return he related the murder of Don Pablo's family, and that of Buffalo Tom, and in proof of the terrible mission which they had taken upon themselves, shook the scalp of Red Monterey, the Mexican, who had been separated from his comrades and was hastening along the trail to overtake them, when the shot from Little Buckskin's rifle—now cremated—laid him low.

The rumbling sounds in the mountains that accompanied the explosions that shut Cortinas and his band prisoners underground, were distinctly heard by our friends. They sounded like distant thunder, but as the sky was clear and such could not possibly be the case, they were greatly mystified.

Mexican Mose connected the noise with those whom they were pursuing, and who must of necessity have entered the mountains by means of this canyon, but in what manner he was unable to hazard a guess, for the secret of the Mexican invasion was unknown to him.

Six determined men like these could do wonders against even a host. They had come to this wild country with a purpose, and trifles would not deter them from carrying out their work. All were united heart and soul with Jack Crawford in the endeavor to rescue his sister, as he believed the Prairie Witch to be, from accounts he had received, especially from Coon-tail Bob, who had been in this vicinity before.

The reader may rest assured that the avengers will make their appearance again, perhaps, when least expected.

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAIL OF THE FIERY SERPENT.

"THIS is my death march!"

Truly had Roger Warden spoken these words, for it was intended that before they were done with him, he should be a dead man.

As she heard his last words, the Prairie Witch again clasped her hands together, and Roger heard her murmur:

"What have I done—what have I done? He would have helped me; he is so like dear Jack; how can I let him die!"

They left her where the encounter had taken place and moved away, Roger held between the two stout Apaches, with the Snake Devil marching ahead. Before going, the latter had spoken some words to the young girl, and pointed to the insensible warrior, from which Roger judged he was commanding her to look to his wound and revive him; but the thoughts of the girl were not for the inanimate brave but for the living, whom she had been the means of bringing to such a terrible fate.

Perhaps he was even a friend of her brother. It was a terrible thought, and bitterly did her heart reproach her as she saw the young man led away.

Could she not help him?

She noted the direction taken by the Apaches; then uttering a cry that was a strange mixture of dismay and satisfaction, she bounded away, totally oblivious of the fact that there was a senseless Indian near by who needed immediate attention.

It was a mystery always to Roger why instead of going to so much trouble in order to encompass his death, the Snake Devil did not apply one of his pets to his flesh, and end matters thus easily.

Were they taking him now to some snake-infested pit to make his death still more terrible? The very thought was enough to make a cold shudder run through his veins, but Roger Warden came of old New England stock, and the blood of the stern Puritans ran in his veins. He was bold and courageous, as his desperate undertaking to this wild country testified, and having nerved himself to meet his fate bravely, whatever it might be, he would not show fear in the presence of his captors.

They led him across the little silver valley, to where the giant cliffs reared their mighty heads, hiding the smiling face of the moon still low in the eastern sky.

In the shadow cast by the lofty heights there was a darker opening, as of a tunnel. Into this they led him some twenty feet, and then halted.

A torch was speedily ignited, and then he saw that he was in a passage, probably the very one that led from the shelf rock in the valley where the silver seekers had their camp, and which he had been about to explore when they debouched so suddenly from the canyon into the valley, and surprised him.

What under Heavens were they about to do with him? He could not conjecture, and at length gave up guessing.

The Snake-devil of the Apaches uttered some words to his followers. They would not go near him, and it was evident that this guardian of the silver valley was an alien from his race because of his being insane, or possessed with devils, so that his very touch was contagious.

Obeying the orders given to them, the two braves stood Roger up against the pillar of rock that jutted out, and commenced to fasten him with thongs of deerskin.

Was it their intention to leave him there to starve? Horrible as the thought was, there was relief in it, for he would at least have a chance to get away, and even when the end came it could not be a more terrible death than would ensue should he be brought in contact with the fangs of one of the glittering reptiles that clung to the person of the snake-devil, and hissed spitefully until he gave their heads little taps, and spoke some sharp words that quieted them.

Before many minutes had gone by, Roger discovered what an error he had committed, and with the revelation came a discovery that made his flesh creep.

Having secured the New Englander to a rocky post, the two Apaches moved back and awaited the further orders of their leader.

Roger saw him assume a listening attitude, as if endeavoring to hear some expected sound. Then he threw himself upon his knees and applied his ear to the rock.

Rising, he uttered a few words, and one of the Apaches bounded away into the depths of the dark passage. Quickly the other fastened his torch to the wall, and moving a few yards away, upturned a stone and revealed a small bag of genuine gunpowder.

From this he took a handful and a slow match of considerable length, and proceeded to form a train in the direction of the entrance to the tunnel. Having accomplished this, he once more took possession of his torch, and seemed to await the orders of the Snake Devil.

Evidently this latter worthy was delaying matters to hear from the scout.

Roger realized his situation.

The silver seekers were advancing along the passage, and it was the intention of the red guardians of the little valley to blow them to atoms. It was a matter of small importance that Roger Warder was to go up with them.

Before the young man had time to reflect further upon the matter, the Indian who had been sent to the interior of the passage, came back with gigantic leaps, and the carelessness with which he bounded among the loose rocks told that he was well acquainted with his surroundings.

What information he brought appeared to create some excitement in the mind of the Snake Devil, judging from the frantic manner in which he rushed from one point to another.

Roger guessed—and rightly, too, as the reader already knows—that the silver seekers were advancing along the passage. His excited questions elicited no answer from his savage captors, so he lapsed into silence again, knowing that his fate was sealed in either case, as he was hated about as cordially by Mexicans as by the Apaches.

The leader of the redskins, having ascertained the distance the intruders were away and the rapidity of their progress, seemed to calculate to a nicety just how long it would take them to reach the place, and adjusted the slow match accordingly.

Roger saw him stand an instant in hesitation—it was a sight he would never forget; that dusky, gaunt frame, with the loathsome reptiles twined about it, and the bead-like eyes fastened upon his face as the demon listened for any sign of the approaching whites—then the torch was applied to the slow match at a particular point.

The sparks immediately flew upward, and the train was fired.

Having accomplished his purpose, the Snake Devil gave one last glance at the captive and then bounded away, followed by the two Apaches.

Roger trembled, as his eyes, almost starting from their sockets, followed the progress of that tiny fiery serpent crawling over the rocky floor slowly but surely toward the magazine of powder.

It was certainly the most terrible two minutes of time during the whole of the young man's life. There was something so horrible in thought of dying thus, that made a cold shudder creep over his frame.

Roger came of valiant stock.

He had seen some times during his life when

death seemed very close, but it was in moments of great danger, when the nerves were tingling with excitement.

Nothing could equal the dismay with which he watched the progress of the fiery spark. His eyes seemed glued to the spot with a terrible fascination that nothing could break.

The powder keg in the crevice lay some distance beyond him, and the fire would have to pass by him in order to reach it.

Oh, if he could only get one of his feet loose, he might trample it out before it had passed. It was only a little spark, at any rate.

How he struggled and wrenched at his bonds during the next twenty seconds. To see him one would be inclined to believe him a madman, as indeed he was for the time being.

Now the fiery serpent had reached a point not ten inches from his feet. He gives up the vain attempt to break his bonds, and leaning forward, tries desperately to blow the spark out.

Vain effort!

It passes by him as with the determination of cruel fate, leaving him staring after it in horror.

Roger can no longer collect his senses for thought. Ideas seem to run riot in his brain, and yet above everything else he realized that death is very near.

The fiery serpent has passed him now and is heading towards the spot where he knows the little keg of powder lies, ready to burst the rocks above and bring down tons upon tons of ore into the passage.

All efforts, either for his own freedom or the extinguishing of the deadly fire, are now deemed useless, and he awaits his doom, the very picture of despair.

Ah, the sound of distant voices reaches his ears, and through the gloom he sees the glimmer of a torch, constantly growing stronger. Well, the silver-seekers will all die in a bunch, it seems, and share a common grave.

Even in this dread moment, the young American sees something fitting in this working of destiny, and smiles grimly, though there is none present to see it.

Only for an instant has his eyes been allowed to rest upon the torch beyond in the passage, and the sea of faces about it. Then they once more fall upon the fiery serpent. It has made alarming progress even during this interval, and must be very, very near the object of its trailing. He tries to utter a brief prayer, but his thoughts are too rampant, and refuse to be driven in any channel.

Oh, it is a terrible time. Will not the awful climax hasten, and end this suspense? Twenty seconds intervening between himself and eternity.

Heaven help him now!

CHAPTER V.

IN THE OLD SPANIARDS' VALLEY OF SILVER.

A WARM hand was laid upon the arm of Roger Warder.

Expecting the terrible explosion to occur with each fleeting second, even this was sufficient to startle him. He realized that he was no longer alone in that dread cavern where death lurked in the little magazine, toward which the fiery serpent was crawling.

The beautiful vision of the silver valley, Prairie Witch, was with him.

She said not a word; there was no time for conversation. The sheen of a knife blade flashed before the eyes of the prisoner; then her hands glided down his person, the thongs parted as if by magic, and in less time than it takes to read it, Roger was free so far as bonds were concerned.

This was no time for ceremony. The mouth of the passage was twenty feet away, and the fiery trail of the serpent dangerously near the powder. At any instant it might explode, and both of them be blown to atoms.

No sooner did Roger find himself free, than seizing the arm of the young girl, he leaped toward the opening with the speed of a tornado. What agony of suspense he passed through during those brief seconds of time, one who has never been similarly situated, face to face with death, cannot imagine, but Roger would never forget how an icy hand seemed laid upon his heart, and his breath came in gasps.

The opening was gained, for Heaven smiled upon them.

Scarcely had they turned the angle when the explosion took place, making the very rocks under their feet tremble as though the earth was quivering in the grasp of some mighty giant.

They ran on for a score or two of yards and

came to a halt in the shadow of the cliffs, both breathing heavily, more from the rapidity than the length of their race.

Roger still held the hand of the girl in his own. Obeying the feeling in his heart, he lifted it to his lips and kissed it gently.

"You have saved me from a terrible death; 'how can I ever thank you enough,' he said, while his eyes sought hers.

"By forgetting the harm I did you so thoughtlessly. I placed you in the toils, and it was but fitting that I should save you or else lose my life in the attempt."

"You are a brave girl. But do you know I am puzzled to death to understand what you are doing here. You speak English even better than I, a native of Massachusetts."

"Mine is a strange story; there is no time to tell it now. This I will say: I have only been among the Apaches a year or so. I was secretly stolen, without leaving a trace. My poor brother Jack has almost gone wild over my disappearance I am sure," said the young girl, with some emotion.

"Ah, then the 'dear Jack' you mistook me for is your brother?" asked Roger, quickly.

"He is."

Even in the half darkness, Roger could see the blood surging up into the fair cheeks of his companion at the recollection.

"Thank fortune for that," he said, with an earnestness that must have made her blush still more, as she could not help divining his meaning.

"Please forget that scene. I am a lady, bred and educated as such, and one would think my savage life had demoralized me. I shall never forgive myself for what occurred, but you do resemble my Jack, and I have been praying for his coming so long. Will you forgive me?" she said, with such a pretty show of penitence that one would suppose she had done our hero some mortal wrong.

Would he? Well, he should be mighty glad to forgive her every hour of the day for the same offense; that was all.

"There is nothing to forgive. As to forgetting it, that I can never do. But let us talk of our situation. I infer that you are a captive here. Under what peculiar circumstances you will tell me another time. Then you would escape with me?"

"Oh! so willingly. My brother is Colonel Jack Crawford of the —th regiment, stationed at Fort Robbins, to watch the border. My name is Florence," she said.

"And mine Roger Warder, of Boston. But what was that second muffled explosion I heard on the heels of the first? Surely it could not be an echo."

"No—no. I heard them arrange it all long before you came. There were two explosions, one in front of the Mexicans and the other in their rear. They have thus been either blown to atoms by the powder, or else shut up in a living tomb, for the roofs of the passages have fallen in and there is no other outlet."

"Horrible," said Roger: "but hark! I am sure I heard a footprint. Yes, look yonder, see the shadowy forms moving through the moonlight like so many specters. They hesitate a moment; there, one after another they troop in."

"It is Haji and his followers. He is an outcast from the tribe, but rules over this valley. We must get further away from here before they come out," said the girl, earnestly.

Roger took her hand and they walked quickly along, like two children.

"But they will have no suspicion that I have escaped?" he said.

"They may, for Haji is very suspicious, and if they should chance to look just outside the passage, they would see our footprints in the soft clay. Look back; they are coming out of the hole. They have a torch with them and have been ascertaining the effect of the explosion. See, it goes near the ground. They are looking. Dear Heaven, I trust they will not see the trail. It advances. All is lost, friend; we must fly."

The young girl spoke the truth, for it was evident that the light was drawing nearer to them with each passing second. What to do the young man hardly knew. Unarmed, he could not make much of a fight against the Apaches, and should the terrible demon get close enough to hurl his venomous serpents through the air, their destruction would certainly be encompassed.

Therefore he eagerly seized upon the young girl's suggestion of flight. Even if it availed them naught in the end, there would at least be granted more time to prepare for resistance.

"Lead the way, Florence, and for Heaven's sake if you know of any way out, take us to it," he whispered.

Lightly they sped along in the shadow of the cliffs. Whither they were going Roger had not the remotest idea, but he was willing to follow wherever she led.

Looking back over his shoulder, he could still see the torch moving along close to the ground, while dusky figures appeared on either side leaping forward. After having been so close to a frightful death, it would be only natural for his nerves to have received a shock, but if so he gave no evidence of it in his manner.

The Prairie Witch kept in the shadow of the cliff until they had come close to the north-eastern part of the valley. From this point on, the rocks arose in still greater heights, but the shadow that had served them so well, came to an end..

What were they to do now?

Roger asked himself this question as they drew near the vague line that divided the moonlight from the dark shadow.

Had the young girl no definite idea in view when she led him thus far? If so, they were no better off than before, and after all he might have to arm himself with the little bow she carried, and defend her until death in some shape came.

It may be supposed, then, that he watched the movements of the young girl with no little anxiety. She had slackened her pace and seemed almost inclined to halt. She did come to a complete pause, when a dozen more steps would have left them in the moonlight, unless they hugged the beetling cliff.

"For Heaven's sake be careful; one misstep and you are lost," she whispered in his ear.

Roger uttered a low exclamation full of wonder and surprise, as he saw her spring upon a rock, and from that to a point that was seemingly the bare face of the cliff itself; nevertheless he did not hesitate about following her, and that speedily.

To his amazement he found that there was a narrow ledge running up the brown cliff at an angle of forty-five degrees, which no one below would have suspected the presence of—unless some accident betrayed it—such was the peculiar topography of the surrounding ground and the face of the cliff.

Up—up they went.

Roger dared not look down for fear of losing his hold and falling. Whether they would be discovered by the Apaches or not, could not be told, but they were still in the shadow.

The ledge was hardly a foot in width, and to keep his place Roger was obliged to press against the wall. Still beyond him he could see the figure of the Prairie Witch, and he kept his eyes upon her as a sailor might watch the star by which he guided his vessel among the dangerous coast rocks.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CLIMBERS OF THE CLIFF.

THEY were now over sixty feet from the valley; a single slip, and the result would be a terrible disaster. Strangely enough Roger was far more concerned on the young girl's account than on his own, but she was quite as nimble and as sure-footed as a big-horn sheep of the Rocky Mountains would have been.

"Careful, Roger," came in a whisper that made his heart thrill, for it told him that his well being was uppermost in her mind.

He saw that she no longer stood erect, but had gone down upon her knees and was creeping upward. Roger did likewise. When he reached the spot he found it indeed a dangerous undertaking, for the ledge, so frightfully narrow even at its widest point, had crumbled away just so as to leave a means of crossing.

It was impossible to go back, and just as bad to remain where he was; besides, the young girl had passed over in safety. Roger was a bold young man, but his bravery was put to a severe test as he passed over on such a mere apology for a foothold. His heart seemed to leap into his throat when a small piece of rock crumbled beneath his hand and dropped, but he retained his presence of mind, and in a dozen seconds found himself on the other side of the dangerous spot.

The Prairie Witch had vanished, and a great fear came into his mind, but it was speedily banished, for he realized how impossible it would have been for her to have fallen without his being cognizant of the fact.

A dozen feet further on, and he found the enigma solved. The ascending ledge came to an end. There was a narrow platform a dozen feet in length, with a deep arched back extending into the cliff. The platform itself did not extend

over a foot beyond the face of the rock, so that it formed no projection that could be readily detected from below.

Roger gave a sigh of relief when he found himself upon this place of temporary safety, whither the young girl had preceded him.

"Thank Heaven, you are safe!" she said, giving him her hand as he crept up, for there is nothing like a common danger to bring people closely together.

Roger remembered the stone that had crumbled off with his passage, and fallen to the valley below. Could that have betrayed them? He took off his hat, and crawling to the edge of the rock, peered cautiously down.

The distance was fully seventy feet, and greater than he had thought. At first he saw nothing, but before ten seconds had passed, his eyes were attracted to a movement almost directly below him, and he noticed human figures standing partly in the shadow that lay along the foot of the cliff to the width of perhaps a yard or so.

Roger was given no time to notice more. A peculiarly sharp, twanging sound greeted his ears, and as he involuntarily drew in his head, a feathered arrow shot by on its upward flight, so close that it actually touched his hair, and but for his involuntary movement, would have pierced his brain.

The Prairie Witch gave a little cry of dismay, for she had heard the well-known sound of the bowstring striking the wood, but had not witnessed the passage of the shaft.

"Are you hurt?" she asked, anxiously.

Roger hastened to assure her that he was not, and also that he did not care to try the experiment again with such a dead shot below.

"It was Eagle Slayer. His arrows seldom cleave the air without bringing down what he shoots at. He can strike the king of the clouds in his swiftest flight. Oh! I am so glad you were not hurt," said the young girl, with such earnestness, that Roger was almost tempted to run the risk of another shot in order to hear her repeat it, though on second thought he concluded not.

There could be no doubt now but what the Apaches had discovered them; probably their attention was drawn upward by the piece of falling stone, and from this they had watched until Roger's head protruded, when the Eagle Slayer had let loose his shaft.

Owing to the quick movement of the young man, the shaft that was wont to soar aloft and pierce the monarch of the skies failed in its task, and the glory of the archer was considerably marred by the want of success on the part of his winged missile.

Higher mounted the moon in the Heaven, and yet no signs of the enemy could be seen or heard. Roger took it upon himself to watch. From where he and the girl sat in the shadow, the narrow platform was plainly visible, and also both means of approach.

He had wondered how they were ever going to get down again, when crawling over the fragile point where the fragment had broken off during his ascent, but the mystery was easily solved.

A second inclined plane led up to the ledge, almost twice as wide as the first, and although it would be dangerous work moving about even on this broader plane, yet the Indians possessed courage enough to attempt it.

From this side the attack would come if at all, and while he sat there with the bow in his hands, and an arrow such as had pierced the arm of the Mexican, upon the string, listening to the story of the young girl told in low tones, he kept his eyes on the watch for any signs of human heads around the corners.

Of course it would have been much better for them to have ascended by means of this wider ledge, but circumstances had rendered such an act impossible, as they would have been compelled to go much further to gain it, and by exposing themselves in the moonlight to the gaze of their enemies, have lost what chances of concealment they had hoped to gain by making such a desperate move.

An hour had passed away.

Occasionally light clouds drifted over the face of the fair moon, and the valley beneath was shrouded in a state of semi-darkness. Knowing that upon these occasions of gloom, the greatest danger existed, Roger redoubled his vigilance.

The young girl was just telling how she had been kidnapped by the chief of the Apaches, who had seen her face in a dream, and heard the Great Spirit say that she was fated to save the nation from destruction, and that she must be made a prisoner. This accounted for the marvelous manner in which the young girl had been

carried off without leaving a trace that the keenest scouts could follow.

She was looked upon as a fair god by the Apaches, and it was believed that the man who touched her would fall dead.

Most of her time was spent in the silver valley. The passage to and from the Indian village had always been conducted in the night, and from the fact that several times she had been seen among the lofty cliffs with a lighted torch in her hand, the girl had come to be called the Fire Witch.

She had never attempted to escape, knowing the fruitlessness of such an effort with hundreds of miles of desert lands lying between the silver valley and the fort; but she had looked and longed, oh, how anxiously, for the coming of her soldier brother.

Florence was in the act of explaining how she had thought it was "dear Jack" who was menaced by the knife in the Mexican camp, when she saw her companion give a sudden start.

The arrow that was upon the string was quickly drawn back almost to the head, and then let fly. Immediately there was a deep thud; then a dark form whirled into view around the corner, balanced upon the edge of the platform, and then, giving a shriek, vanished over the edge.

In this form with the flourishing arms, Roger had recognized an Apache brave, with the arrow he had discharged buried deep in his brain. He had crawled up the broader path, but found a much more speedy method of getting down. If the arrow left any life, it was pretty certain to be pounded out by the time he reached the earth far below.

Roger immediately replaced the fatal shaft by another taken from the quiver of the young girl, and waited, ready to give a warm welcome to as many as would come, but the minutes crept by, and no further signs of the enemy could be discovered.

The clouds were of greater magnitude now, and sometimes the face of the moon would be fully covered for five or even ten minutes.

Their situation was a perilous one, and Roger had not the remotest idea how they were ever going to get down. To descend while their enemies were below was impossible; to ascend even if the coast was clear, equally so, and there was not the remotest chance of communicating with his friends in the gully, where they had camped while he prospected.

While reflecting upon this strait in which he was placed, Roger felt the hand of the young girl laid upon his arm.

"Look! what is that?" she whispered in his ear.

Turning his eyes upward, where he had not looked before, Roger saw a pair of human legs actually dangling in mid-air, and plainly outlined against the star-spangled Heavens. What strange event was about to occur now?

CHAPTER VII.

INTO THE JAWS OF DEATH.

"Now's the time; down ye go!"

As the words are spoken, a human figure disappears over the edge of the great cliff that rises two hundred feet from the valley, and whose battle-scarred face has withstood the storms of ages.

What under Heaven does this mean? Surely it is certain death that lies before the reckless man. Other forms are upon the top of the rocky height, several peering over as if to ascertain what the fate of the suicidal attempt will be, the rest standing erect, with their bodies bent back as though resisting a strain.

What is that dark object that slips through their hands and seems to run over the edge of the cliff? A rope; ah, that explains the strange disappearance of the daring man who went over the brink.

Already he is fifty feet from the top, and being slowly lowered by the stout arms that hold the rope.

Surely these figures standing in the moonlight are familiar ones whom we left some hours back climbing the mountains.

Those peering over the edge and watching the descent of their comrade are Colonel Crawford, Mexican Mose and Little Buckskin, while the two stalwarts at the rope are Old California Joe and Blue Bill.

Then the figure dangling at the end of the rope must be the eccentric Coon-Tail Bob, the simoom of the desert, who is being lowered, unconsciously by his comrades, into the very jaws of death, for the Apaches are below.

Past the narrow ledge where crouch our hero and the Prairie Witch descends the scorcher of the plains. Naturally Roger and the fair girl think this must be one of the band of Mexicans, and the arrow that Roger has drawn to the head is not discharged.

Perhaps it was just as well for the catamount from the Red River country that he did not land on the narrow ledge for a rest, as the half-darkness would have failed to proclaim the fact that he was a friend, and damage might have been done.

Roger took the sharp little knife that Florence carried in her belt, and stepped forward with the intention of applying it to the rope, but his heart failed him.

"He will meet his fate soon enough down in the depths," he said, hoarsely.

If Roger had only known.

Down went the coon-tail hunter on his daring mission of exploration. It was, indeed, well for him that the descent was made during the period of darkness, for had he attempted the feat while the moon shone, the deadly serpents of the Snake Devil would have greeted his arrival in the valley, even if the feathered shaft of Eagle Slayer did not stop his career when suspended in mid-air.

The rangers had reached the edge of the cliff almost half an hour previous, but the savage Apaches below, whatever they were doing to get at the prisoners of the ledge, gave no sign of their presence, and the distance had been too great to distinguish objects upon the ground through the moonlight.

If there were redskins upon either ledge near the platform, our ranger friends had failed to discover them; but this was not singular, as they had only been granted a short spell of moonlight since reaching the spot, and this had been consumed in making calculations as to whether the rope was long enough, for they had used all their lassoes in its construction.

The lower the hunter went, the greater the oscillating motion became, and he soon found himself swinging to and fro like the pendulum of a clock.

This soon became dangerous in a double sense, for if there was an enemy in the vicinity, it would attract attention towards him, and at the same time he found it growing more difficult every minute to hold on the rope.

After making up his mind to stop this dangerous motion, Coon-tail Bob put out his hand and seized upon each jutting rock.

In this way he reduced it to a minimum, and at length descended once more as straight as a rocket falling after its brief career was over.

Although the scout knew it not, there were several heads thrust out from the face of the cliff, on that side of the platform where the broad ledge lay. The Indians had heard what little noise he had made, and were looking for the cause, but in the semi-gloom they could see nothing.

By this time the bold hunter was close to the end of his perilous voyage.

When within a few feet of the bottom, the rope must have slipped a little in the hands of those above, for he descended the last yard with considerable force, and landed square upon the breast of the Indian brave who was lying on his back just at that point.

This warrior had been stationed here by the Snake Devil to watch the sky and see if anything was outlined against it. For several hours he had performed his duty faithfully, but nothing had appeared, and it became monotonous after awhile, so his eyes had closed, and his soul lost itself in slumber.

When such a heavy body as that of Coon-tail Bob descended upon him, it may be supposed that the Indian awoke rather suddenly.

He would have yelled in his surprise, but the breath was too well punched out of his greasy body, so he could only struggle up to a sitting posture, and make a gurgling sound deep down in his throat.

The hunter had been entirely thrown off his balance by the event, but his hold upon the rope prevented him from falling. He knew what was the matter, and that immediate action was needed.

Even in the semi-gloom he could see the form of the Indian, and with great presence of mind he loosened his grasp upon the rope and sprang upon the red man.

When the great hand of Coon-tail Bob closed upon a human throat, all hope for the owner was usually gone. So it was in the present instance.

The gurgling articulation ceased as if by magic as the hunter pressed the Indian back; then a long blade passed into the dusky side, and another

spirit had gone to the happy hunting grounds of the red men.

At this instant the moon came out in her splendor, and Coon-tail Bob found that he and the dead Indian were behind a little shelter of bushes. Before he had time to note more, a movement caught his ear, and upon looking out he was almost petrified to see the form of the horrible Snake Devil not ten feet away. Around his neck and waist were the glistening coils of his horrid pets.

He had heard the gurgling sound made by the Indian upon whom Coon-tail Bob had alighted, and was coming to see what it meant. The ranger fervently hoped he would depart, not finding the warrior. Not so, for his eye was attracted toward the still waving rope, outlined against the white rocks, and with an ejaculation of rage the terrible creature sprang directly toward where the hunter crouched.

There are times in the lives of the boldest men the earth has produced when the very blood seemed to congeal in their veins with horror, and each individual hair upon their heads stand on end.

Coon-tail Bob was not in a position quite as bad as this, but it was a terrible plight for a man to find himself situated in. He had proved his bravery on many a scout and battlefield, and was known as a reckless plainsman, as his descent into the valley had proved.

The hunter was not granted time for reflection, and whatever he accomplished would have to be more the work of mere intuition than well-digested planning.

Already had this hideous being advanced to the fringe of bushes, his eyes glued upon the swaying rope and following its downward course.

There was no chance for retreat, even had the hunter wished to do so, for the rocky wall arose above him, and any movement he might make to crawl along its base would be readily detected by the Indian.

His hand had fallen upon a piece of stone, and he closed his fingers about it, resolved, if it came to the worst, to hurl it into the face of the demon and trust to luck to make his escape into the valley. The knife with which he had slain the warrior upon whom he had alighted was grasped in his other hand, but he had no desire to reach such close quarters as to use this.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TERRIBLE EMBRACE OF THE MAN-GRIZZLY.

HAVING gained the fringe of bushes, the Indian knelt down, and carefully parting them, looked in. All this time the snakes coiled upon his person were rattling their tails and hissing in such a frightful manner that it is a wonder Bob's arm was not paralyzed with horror.

He crouched there as motionless as the rocks themselves, hoping to escape unseen. Then he became conscious that a pair of glittering orbs was fastened upon his face, and a second later a guttural grunt proclaimed the fact that he was discovered.

Any attempt at further concealment was worse than useless, and Coon-tail Bob had no intention of trying it. The stone which he had held in readiness was hurled into the ugly, pock-marked countenance of the Apache.

Such was the force of the blow that the Snake-Devil fell flat upon his back.

Coon-tail Bob did not wait to see any more. He either forgot about the rope, or else realized that to attempt his escape by means of it would be adequate to an invitation to death, for he deserted it.

With one gigantic bound he cleared the bushes and the recumbent form of the Snake Devil. One of the deadly reptiles made a dart at him as he passed over, but being wrapped around the neck of the fallen man, it could not reach far enough, and so the hunter escaped what might have proven to be a deadly wound.

Coon-tail Bob knew well enough now that there were more foes in the immediate neighborhood, and was convinced that if he did not want to find himself in exceedingly warm quarters, he had better vacate the premises immediately.

His chief concern, however, was in regard to the terrible pets of the Snake Devil, and he wanted to put as much space between them and himself as was possible in a given length of time.

Lucky it was for Coon-tail Bob, that, as he sped across the open stretch of ground that lay between the base of the cliffs and the trees, the moon hid her smiling face behind a cloud, for an arrow came hissing through the air and hurtled by in rather close proximity to his head, which

might have been struck but for the sudden withdrawal of the Heavenly light.

For the second time on this night Eagle Slayer, the man who never missed, had failed to strike the object at which his shaft was directed.

Reaching the trees, the hunter at last looked over his shoulder. He saw a dusky figure in full pursuit, and the moonlight showed him that he was not the dreaded Snake Devil as he had at first supposed.

This settled the matter.

The hunter came to a full stop, turned in his tracks, and leveled a revolver at the pursuing figure. Realizing his danger, the Apache gave a wild yell to distract the aim of the hunter, and at the same time leaped from side to side.

But his doom was already sealed, and with the crack of the revolver he threw up his hands and rolled over in a confused ball. Coon-tail Bob did not wait to see any more, but turning, he once more resumed his flight.

The valley was not over half a mile across, so that he could not go very far, at any rate. If he was to remain there until morning, he would have a pretty tough time of it; for, judging by the experience he had already had, it was safe to judge that there was a whole tribe of Indians in the valley, and whatever they lacked in numbers would speedily be made up, as the signal fires were burning upon the mountain top.

Almost before he could realize it, the hunter had reached the other side of the valley, and the white cliff arose like a shadowy veil in front of him, with the moonlight upon its face in alternate brightness and shadow. Here and there the silver veins gleamed like living streams of fire that dazzled the eye, and the hunter realized that without a doubt he was in the far-famed silver valley.

He had heard terrible stories told of this place and its ghoulish inhabitants, and he could not help expressing a fervent wish that he was well out of the valley again.

For a time he stood lost in thought. What action would his comrades take? Were there no means whereby he might effect an exit, other than that by which he had come in? Surely yes, else how came the Apaches in the valley?

It was equal to suicide to think of returning to where he had left the rope with its iron pot-hook in which he had placed his foot, dangling, so the only thing left to the hunter was to search along the cliff for another means of getting out.

Coon-tail Bob was a man of action, as the previous events of this night have proved, and having determined upon this course of action, he was not the one to dally in his work.

He commenced moving along the foot of the cliff, looking for some path which might lead him to the top.

Strangely enough, before ten minutes had passed by he was successful. The moonlight, dipping down into the valley, had shown him what seemed to be a solid path leading up into the cliff.

Without an instant's hesitation he commenced the ascent. It might lead him into the very den of the mountain terror, a grizzly bear, but Coon-tail Bob did not hesitate, for he was a man difficult to alarm.

Such was the peculiar constituency of the moonlight that he could not see across the valley. As he arose higher, he could follow the line of the great cliff until it became vague, and blended with the surrounding atmosphere, but, looking toward the side of the valley where he knew his friends were posted, a wall of misty vapor arose up, shutting off his view.

Up went the hunter.

At times when the path dipped into the face of the cliff, all around him was dark and he was compelled to feel his way. Nevertheless he was ascending, and that was a great point with the intrepid hunter.

It was while making his way through one of these gloomy places that a slight noise above him attracted his attention. While he crouched there listening, for he could not see anything, something touched his body, a moving form that was coming down the path from above. Grizzly or Indian he knew not which, but with great presence of mind he threw himself forward.

His hand came in contact with a man's throat, and at the same instant he felt his own neck encircled in an iron grip.

Coon-tail Bob certainly felt a little squeamish about having a tussle with a grizzly bear in this dangerous place, where a single misstep, or the blows of the animal's paw might send him down two hundred feet.

His hand had touched the shaggy hide of a grizzly bear, but now he knew that the man had on a coat made from the animal's hide.

They immediately clinched, and struggled for

the mastery, each ignorant of the other's identity. The hunter knew that he had hold of a Mexican, for a savage oath had left the fellow's lips as the hand of the other had closed upon his neck.

A dense shadow fell upon the path at this point, for the moon was hidden behind the spur of the cliff. Such a desperate situation had seldom fallen to the share of the hunter before.

It was a silent struggle, for each had a firm grip upon his enemy's breathing apparatus, so that even had they desired to make a noise it was impossible.

The Mexican was a man of gigantic proportion, and powerful as a Farnese Hercules, but he had met a fair match in the hunter. They fought as did the gladiators in the arena of ancient Rome, each muscle strained to the utmost tension, and every vein standing out like whipcord.

Twice in their desperate endeavors to gain the ascendancy, the mortal foes have bent over the edge of the path, and glared down into the terrible depths of alternate gloom and moonlight below. Other sounds now reached their ears; the friends of the Mexican are hurrying down the path, as if understanding that he has gotten into some trouble. Coon-tail Bob sees them in a strip of moonlight; he makes a desperate effort to throw the fellow from him; the man staggers, falls, clutches at the throat of the hunter who bends above him, seizes hold of it, and draws him over into the empty air, with a fall of two hundred feet below them.

CHAPTER IX.

WORK OF THE RAW-HIDE ROPE.

CROUCHED upon the platform, Roger Warder listened intently. Certain sounds coming from below had led him to believe that the man he had supposed was a Mexican, was not meeting with an undisputed entry into the valley. The dying sound of the Apache whom Coon-tail Bob had slain, reached his ears as it had those of the Snake-Devil.

When the pistol shot and the wild yell that preceded it, reached the ears of those upon the top of the cliff, they realized that something was wrong, and commenced pulling up the rope with the intention of sending another of their number down into the jaws of death in order to assist the hunter.

The Snake-Devil had recovered his senses, and made a leap at the rope, but only managed to send it flying along the face of the cliff with a pendulum-like movement.

Roger watched the rope, wondering what those on the top of the cliff were about to do next. Suddenly his ears were saluted with a wild whoop, and as the rope swung past the platform he saw an Indian fastened to the extreme end of it.

In an instant he comprehended the truth. The rope, in its oscillating movement had hitched the pot-hook in the buckskin breechclout of an Apache who was crouching on the inclined ledge, and those above had pulled him from his perch.

At any rate, there he was like a man learning to swim, with hands and feet clawing the air, and banging against the rocks with every jerk of those above, who realized they had caught a whale of some sort.

Poor Apache!

In either case his doom was sealed, for if he dropped he would be crushed like an egg, while on the other hand, if the rangers drew him up they would put a speedy end to his career.

The amazement of the poor wretch at thus finding himself dangling from the end of a rope, unable to save himself, and constantly ascending, was probably only equaled by the rangers' astonishment, when, by the aid of the moon's rays, they discovered what a strange fish they had hooked.

As the rope had come up part of the way before this weight became attached to it, they knew that he had been ascending the cliff for some purpose or other.

The wretch was hauled up to within a dozen yards of the top, and then those who held the rope, learning what was at the end of it, from their comrades who peered over the edge, commenced to shake it violently.

Soon the pot-hook gave way, or rather the tortured buckskin in which it was fastened did, and the ill-fated redskin shot downward like a falling meteor, flashing through the space lighted by the moon, and vanishing in the milky sea below.

Then these brave men held a hurried consultation in order to devise some plan of action. Blue Bill settled the matter speedily by placing his foot in the pot-hook, and with his knife between

his teeth, climbed over the edge of the terrible chasm.

He intended going down to ascertain what had become of Coon-tail Bob, braving the multiplied perils that beset the undertaking, because his chivalrous nature would not allow him to remain idle while one of his friends was in danger, even though such a reckless move might bring him into the shadow of death.

The others might have questioned his right to take precedence, but his movement was beyond argument, and they could only lower away and growl at Blue Bill's "impudence" in doing what they wished to do.

When the rope was over two-thirds out the strain suddenly ceased. At first they thought the brave ranger had lost his hold, but immediately three jerks upon the rope signified that he was all right. They understood that this was the point where the unfortunate Indian had been picked up, and that there was something connected with this point that they did not understand.

Fortunately for Blue Bill, after he had commenced his descent, the fair moon hid her smiling face behind a cloud, and the Indians in the valley did not see the dangling figure that came down the face of the cliff.

Roger and the young girl were still crouching on the ledge. They had seen the swift descent of the Indian, and heard him strike upon the rocks below, but it was a little dark to them. Had the Mexican who went down into the valley sent up this red warrior?

While Roger was puzzling his brain about this matter, he was surprised to see another dangling form descending. This time the man came to a halt upon the platform. Blue Bill, seeing that the moon was about to come out from behind the cloud for a minute or so, and catching sight of the platform, had wisely determined to rest there until the chance came for a further descent.

How destiny often hangs upon the merest trifles.

Unconscious that within five feet of him there crouched a human being with an arrow already fitted to the string, ready to be discharged at a second's warning, Blue Bill stood upon the platform holding the rope for fear it might swing out of his reach if he suffered it to go free, and imprison him on this strange shelf.

Fearful lest the brilliant moonlight should betray him, he stepped back a pace and came very close to the barbed shaft that was aimed at his heart.

"I wonder what has become of Bob. It was a shame to let him go down first; I ought to have been the one, for I come out of every tussle all right, as sure as my name's Blue Bill. Ha! what was that sound? I thought I heard something move, but I reckon I war mistaken. Now, I wonder who'll come down after me? Thar's Mexican Mose, he's never got over his foolish, boyish ways, and would just as soon come down here as not. Then thar's his chum, Old Joe, and I shouldn't wonder but what Colonel Jack Crawford would get ahead of 'em all, he's so fiery. Halloo! what in tarnation thunder's that?"

This time there was no mistaking the cry that he heard, for it fell from the lips of the young girl as she heard her brother's name mentioned.

Turning, Blue Bill peered into the gloomy depths of the niche in the wall closer than he had done before. A revolver was grasped in his hand.

"Who are you?" he demanded, as a man's figure arose directly in front of him.

"A friend to Colonel Crawford. I do not know you, Blue Bill, but I have heard of you twenty times while passing along the border. Roger Warder is my name. Will you shake hands?"

"Willingly; but whom have we here? Surely I see a white figure yonder. You are not alone?" asked the ranger.

"This is Colonel Crawford's sister; we were chased up here while trying to escape from the silver valley and the Apaches."

Blue Bill gave a low whistle.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed, "won't the colonel jump for joy? I see you know about this here silver mine, Mr. Warder."

"Know about it? Why, I have come all the way from Boston to secure this mine. My secret got out through a couple of scoundrels who stole part of the papers, and a servant who copied them, and preceding me, joined Cortina's band of guerrillas. Know about it; why, if anybody has a claim this silver valley belongs to me!"

After a little further conversation it was decided that Florence should go up to her brother. It was the brave young girl who proposed this measure. Blue Bill saw it was for the best and agreed with her, so that Roger's remonstrance

was in vain, and when the moon once more darkened her face, the young girl swung clear of the platform, and was pulled rapidly up by the strong arms above.

CHAPTER X.

UNDER THE GLEAMING BLADE.

If Missouri Mose and Old California Joe, who manipulated the rope, had been surprised when they found a redskin hitched to the pothook on the former occasion when it was drawn up, they were almost petrified with amazement when, instead of helping their comrade, Blue Bill, or else Coon-tail Bob, the eccentric hunter, over the edge, Little Buckskin gave his hand to and gallantly assisted a young lady upon *terra firma*.

Florence had held on during her perilous trip with a bravery that was simply wonderful, considering the fact of her being only a girl. She had kept her eyes upward and gladly caught the extended hand of the squat little trapper which had been mechanically reached out to her.

Colonel Crawford was at a little distance; he had been looking for a better place to lower the rope, but at this juncture he came up. He stood as if turned to a pillar of stone. Amazement bound his hands, his eyes, his tongue.

"Dear Jack, is it you?"

Florence asked the question in a hesitating way. She had been deceived once before when she felt so certain, and did not want to commit such a blunder again.

"Florence! Thank Heaven for this mercy. My own dear sister!" and the poor prisoner of the silver valley was folded in the soldier's arms.

A few words served to explain matters, and the rangers knew where brave Blue Bill was, but it was a mystery to all where the coon-tail hunter had gone to.

After a hasty deliberation it was decided that as the Apaches in the valley were few in number, they should go down, and when morning broke proceed to demolish them.

Little Buckskin heard with dismay that he was to be left with the Prairie Witch, and this he would not consent to until the colonel had taken him aside and told him seriously that there was not another man on earth with whom he would consent to leave his dear sister, for it might and probably would be the most dangerous task of all, for the Apaches would soon be swarming over the mountains, drawn hither by the fire signals which still shot Heavenward from the peak to the north.

The little ranger's eyes fairly snapped with delight at the confidence reposed in him, for he had thought he was about to be cheated out of his share of the coming fight.

Having completed their arrangements, the bold men set about carrying out the plan.

Blue Bill and Roger Warder upon the platform below, suddenly saw a human figure come between them and the sky. It was Mexican Mose. They drew him in and once more the rope went up.

This time Colonel Crawford was the one to make his appearance, and the two counterparts stood face to face. It was too dark to see distinctly, but the soldier, who had heard from his sister about Roger, grasped his hand and shook it warmly.

Old California Joe, the sharpshooter, was the only one left to come down, and they did not see how he was going to manage it; but Little Buckskin was shrewd if he was small.

He passed the rope around a smooth and stout rock, and having this hitch, could have lowered an elephant, if the lassoes would have held such a weight.

Old Joe went down by spurts, and as he had to hold on with both hands for fear a sudden jar would make him fall, he could not prevent the pendulum movement that soon began, and continued more violently with every passing second.

The old fellow began to grow a little alarmed himself, as he swung along the rough face of the cliff, receiving not a few cracks from projecting crags that threatened to throw him down into the depths.

Suddenly a hand shot out and clutched hold of him. Naturally the ranger thought it was one of his comrades, and he did not know how far wrong he was until he found himself thrown upon his back on the narrow ledge leading to the platform, and a bony hand gripped his throat.

The moon sailed into a sea of azure just at this moment, and Old California Joe saw the critical nature of his position.

Between his face and the blue sky was the up-raised arm of an Indian, and a gleaming knife was clinched in his hand. The dark eyes of the savage glared into his own orbs with the intensity of a tiger's.

It was a situation such as few men have been in and lived to tell the story. California Joe was not one to have his senses benumbed with horror. A few seconds of inaction would have sealed his doom, for already was the savage's arm quivering as it gained momentum.

Old Joe was a tremendous tobacco chewer, and always had a gigantic quid in his cheek. At this critical instant he squirted a stream of juice slap into the gleaming eyes of the Apache, at the same time giving his head a desperate twist out of the fellow's grasp.

The result was all that he could have asked. A sharp click told that the redskin's knife struck the hard rock where Joe's head had been, and it was heard clattering down the face of the cliff.

The old sharpshooter did not give him a chance to recover from his demoralization, but instantly threw up his arms, and clasped the red fellow to him like a brother.

It was a bear's hug.

Lightning could not have been more rapid in its movements than the old ranger, for he had reversed the position of himself and the Indian in an incredibly short space of time, and kneeling on the redskin's chest he held his head over the edge.

The fellow in his agony struggled desperately, and several times Joe came near going over with his antagonist.

At this instant the twang of a bow-string was heard, and the feathered shaft sent by Eagle Slayer, from further down the ledge, passed clear through the head of the Apache; this time the death-shooter had struck his mark, but thanks to his distance from the combatants and the deceptive moonlight, he had mistaken his comrade for the enemy.

Old Joe pushed the body over the edge, and joined his friends whom he heard above him. There were now five of them on the platform, and the next move was to get into the valley. Brave Blue Bill seized the swinging rope during a period of semi-darkness, and after giving the signal, went down into the depths. He found the corpse of the Indian killed by the coon-tail hunter, and stood over it, rifle in hand, ready to defend the rest of his friends in their descent.

Down they came, one after another, sliding along the rope, but not a foe was to be seen. The Snake Devil, Eagle Slayer and what braves were left, had withdrawn, but only to watch and plan some new deviltry.

CHAPTER XI.

EL DEMONIO, THE HUNCHBACKED FIEND.

"Hold up yer hands. Quick, or by the etern'l I'll put daylight through ye!"

The speaker raised a heavy revolver as he spoke, and aimed it in a manner that was, perhaps, even more significant than the gruff words he uttered. Such a terrible looking wretch human eyes never fell on before, and his very presence seemed to mock the fair landscape around him.

Misshapen, hunchbacked and twisted out of all semblance to humanity, he looked like an ugly ape. His hair was long and unkempt, hanging in masses from head and face. Through this tangle gleamed a pair of red eyes, that seemed to glare and sparkle like a couple of hot coals.

His arms, as is usually the case with creatures of his species, were unnaturally long, so that his talon-like fingers came below his knees. Iron arms they were—arms that were like bands of steel, and which, if once thrown around the form of an enemy, crushed the life out.

He stood half concealed among the bushes. The day was wearing rapidly away, and in the hollows the somber shades of night were collecting in force, ready to issue forth at a given signal and pull to the curtains of night.

In front of this misshapen wretch, who shunned the bright light of day because he hated to see his shadow, a horseman had come to a halt. The reason of his sudden stoppage was made evident in the leveled revolver of the hunchback.

He, too, was singular-looking—not in form, for he sat gracefully in the saddle, but in the manner in which he concealed his features. A sombrero was pulled down over his face, and a heavy mantle which he wore over his shoulders, pulled up to meet it. Where this dark blue cloak was thrown back to admit of his holding

the bridle, the bright crimson lining could be seen.

From under his sombrero a pair of jet black eyes could be seen, having in their liquid depths a cutting gleam that seemed to pierce through to one's very soul.

There was nothing to do but obey the mandate of the hunchback, so up went the well-gloved hands of the horseman above his head, and yet not the quiver of a nerve gave evidence of fear.

"Are you satisfied?" he demanded, in a full, round, rich tone.

"Nary a time. My next move will be ter dispose o' ye. I'll spot that purty cloak o' yours in a manner ye won't like," grated the hunchback, who seemed enraged.

"Hold! you know not what you are doing, *El Demonio*," cried the other.

"Do I not? Ha! you know me; that confirms my suspicion. I will tell you who I am, and who you are, my pretty bird. I am a mockery upon the Creation, a deformed wretch whom they rightly named *El Demonio*, the devil. I have been laughed at, and jeered at, and cursed at so often that I dared not go out in the daytime, for fear of seeing my shadow, and being driven mad by its hideousness. I am a fugitive from justice, a murderer twice over if you will, but they goaded me to do what I did, and their blood is on their heads. There is a price offered for my body, dead or alive, and you have come to gain it. But you shall never go back. Government spy, dog that you are, your body shall rot here among the mountains."

"Hold! a word with you."

"Not a word. All the talk in the world could not convince. You must die, I swear it. Look your last upon the earth, for you have not a moment to live."

"No—no, you would not—"

"Would not. You know not *El Demonio*. There is only one he fears."

"You will have to account for my death to Black Dante."

No sooner had that name dropped from the horseman's lips than the arm that leveled the revolver fell to the side of the hunchback, as if it acted upon him like a thrill of electricity. The glaring eyes sparkled still more, until it seemed as if rivulets of light ran out of their depths.

"Ha! you have spoken it. What if I had killed you; his anger would have been terrible," and the hunchback actually trembled at the bare thought, for body and soul he was under the thumb of this prince of Mexican guerrillas, Black Dante.

"He would have crushed you like a tarantula. I bring a message from him to you. Can you read?" demanded the horseman, taking out a slip of paper.

"Si, senor," replied the horrible hunchback, who, as he advanced, looked not unlike some great spider, ugly and deadly.

He took the paper and centered the glare of his red eyes upon it. Then it was folded up and handed back.

"Senor, it is for you to command, *El Demonio* to obey. I will help you kill this man you hate. All I ask as pay is that you will never whisper to him how I treated his friend."

"Agreed," returned the senor, quickly, "and see to it you give me no further cause for complaint, as I am not unhandy with the pistol myself. Why, when you first cried out to halt, I had a pistol in my hand, and if I had chosen, whiff! and your life would have been snuffed out like a candle. You will find it to your advantage in more ways than one, *El Demonio*, to make me your friend."

There was a ringing determination in the voice of the horseman that spoke volumes, and the hunchback's fierce aspect vanished as if blown away on the breeze.

"Senor, you can command me. I will serve you well, but it is because one has commanded whom I would wade through rivers of blood or oceans of fire to obey. Dismount and follow me without fear."

The horseman threw himself to the ground with a careless grace that seemed to mark every movement.

El Demonio reached out one of his skinny claws to clutch the bridle so that he might lead the animal, but his horrid appearance seemed to be repulsive enough to frighten the steed, for it gave a snort of alarm, and rearing up, pawed the air viciously.

The misshapen wretch seemed to actually enjoy the alarm of the horse, for he grinned horribly, showing his yellow tusks as his lips parted.

"Your horse is aristocratic, senor, and you will have to lead him yourself. My home is near at

hand in this dense *chaparral*. Once there you can tell me what you will. Follow."

There was a narrow path cut through the thicket, and after passing along this for some thirty yards, they found themselves suddenly confronted by a huge pile of rugged boulders that stood like grim sentries to the mountains.

The ugly guide did not attempt to mount this strange and almost unscalable mound, but suddenly dodged into a black cleft, and a minute later he made his appearance, bearing a lighted torch, and asked the senor to follow.

The cleft grew larger as they proceeded, the great grim walls rising on either hand until they seemed to meet far overhead. In such places as this the stars are visible during the daytime to the human eye, and the fact is easily accounted for by a simple scientific rule.

They came to a halt.

Around them evidences could be seen that proclaimed this place to be the habitation of the hunchback. The murmur of a subterranean stream could be heard. This was the same water-course that ran through the *arroyo* into which our friends, the scalp-hunters, had leaped to save their lives, when the hungry flames pursued them.

The horseman threw himself upon a pallet of skins, and still keeping his face well concealed, commenced speaking.

To his words the other listened intently, his red eyes roving from point to point as if unable to remain quiet, and anon they would rest upon the figure of his guest, when a puzzled light would creep over his ugly face.

"Senor," he said, when the other had finished speaking, "I will do as you say; I am with you to the death. Why you should hate this soldier I neither know nor care, but you must bear him a terrible grudge to follow him to this country. We will waste no time but pursue at once. I saw him pass this very morning, and but for his dangerous looks and his soldier dress might have done the business on my own hook. When *El Demonio* gets on his trail he will not have long to live."

"Then let us off at once. A burning hatred eats up my heart, and nothing but the death of Colonel Crawford can quench the flame. Away, my good *El Demonio*, away!"

"Caramba! how the man bears hatred. I should not like to make a foe out of him. Senor," he added, in a louder tone of voice, "I trust you will pardon me for being inquisitive. I have a peculiar faculty for remembering voices. I could have sworn that I had heard yours before."

The senor gave a perceptible start.

"Nonsense," he said.

This time his voice was much harsher, as if he was endeavoring to disguise it, having taken the alarm.

"Down in Monterey I did a service for a young senorita. She paid me well for my service, which I shall never mention. Your voice makes me think of her, but I suppose it is a mere accidental resemblance, for in all probability you never heard the name of Donna Isadore Carmen Cordova."

"Never," said the other, calmly, for he knew the red eyes were upon him.

"He lies," muttered the hunchback to himself, "and I will yet ferret out his secret. I never mistake a voice. Come, senor," he added, aloud, "all is ready; we will now start out on the death trail."

Ay, a death trail it will prove to more than one, *El Demonio*, but little do you realize what fate has in store for you and the one who follows under your guidance.

CHAPTER XII.

BATTLING IN THE DARK.

WHEN Coon-tail Bob went over the precipice, with that terrible fall of two hundred feet below him, his heart gave a mighty bound, and then seemed to stand still, as though the agonies of death had already seized upon it.

The man-grizzly had thrown up an arm and clutched the hunter by the throat. Had the latter been in a position to give his strength full sway, he might have resisted even this fearful strain, but it took him unawares, and when he was not prepared for such work.

His great effort to throw the Mexican over before the fellow's comrades reached the scene of action, had bent him forward so that he was leaning over the edge, and looking down into the giddy depths when that hand shot up and clutched his throat.

Some fifteen feet from the rocky ledge, Bob's hands wildly and involuntary thrown out, caught upon a stout bush that grew from the

face of the bald rock, and to which they immediately clung with the tenacity of a genuine parasite.

Naturally the grip of the Mexican had become loosened when the object by which he had attempted to hold him from destruction followed him in the plunge, and when Coon-tail Bob thus came to such an abrupt halt, his hand released its hold upon the neck of the hunter.

A wild cry pealed up from the depths, and the hunter, hanging by that frail bush, heard the unlucky man-grizzly striking from point to point, until the sounds died away and all was still.

It was the silence of death.

Coon-tail Bob could not remember when he had been in a more desperate situation than the present. Enemies above him, and sure death below if he would but loosen his clasp upon that frail bush; what under Heaven was he to do?

Instinctively his toes had sought for resting places in the rocky wall, and found them, too, for the cliff was rough. So far, so good, but it could only delay his fate by a few minutes at the most.

He turned his eyes upwards, and saw, where the moonlight fell like a silver band across the face of the cliff, just above his head, what appeared to be a narrow ledge, running into the rock, as if a path had been chiseled out by human agency, under the broader one which he had been using when assailed by the man-grizzly.

He saw more.

Several heads were thrust out and brought into prominence by being outlined against the Heavens where the bright stars twinkled.

There was not an instant to be lost.

Coon-tail Bob drew himself up with the power of a born acrobat. If the bush gave way now, no power on earth could save him from falling that fearful distance, and being crushed into an unrecognizable mass upon the rocks far below.

Even as his left hand went out and reached for the ledge of rock, he could feel the frail bush, already sadly strained by the rude jerk of his sudden stoppage, giving way.

The horror of those few seconds of time; never would he forget them.

Thank Heaven! his hand touched the firm rock and closed upon it with the grasp of a vise. Now let the bush give way when it will. His other hand was speedily transferred to his new hold, and then, drawing in a long breath, the hunter commenced pulling himself up by main strength.

Another danger now threatened him.

The Mexicans, peering down through the mingled moonlight and shadow, had discovered that it was not their comrade who thus hung in jeopardy, and that, therefore, it must necessarily be the man who had thrown him to his death.

Coon-tail Bob, as he pulled himself up to the strange little ledge, heard a cracking sound above him, and by the small particles that fell around him, he knew that they were tearing at the rocks with the intention of hurling them down upon him.

One supreme effort was made, and as he rolled panting under the shelter of the cave ledge, a large rock struck the outer edge and went hurtling down into the darkness below.

The hunter lay quiet for a moment or two, but his wits were at work. He knew that such vengeful men would not let him off thus easily, and if there were any possible means out of the difficulty, he had better leave his quarters as speedily as possible.

Crawling carefully along, he found to his satisfaction that the ledge was not a mere niche in the face of the cliff, but that it did lead somewhere, and was undoubtedly the means taken by some animal to reach its den.

As he advanced slowly, the route grew broader, and the fact became apparent that, as did the larger ledge above, the small one terminated in a cavern completely arched over.

All at once Coon-tail Bob came to a pause. He was surrounded by complete darkness, but it was not this that brought him to a halt. There was a strange odor in the atmosphere that proclaimed the fact of his being in a bear's den.

While the hunter was kneeling there and snuffing the air, danger was coming from his rear if he had only known it. Half a dozen human forms were creeping stealthily along the little ledge. These were the Mexicans of Cortinas, led by that redoubtable chieftain himself.

An exclamation fell from the lips of the hunter. Before him, shining through the darkness, were four burning coals of fire. The full desperation of his situation flashed like a ray of

light through his brain. He was in the den of the grizzlies, and two of the monsters were now before him.

His hand sought his belt and fell upon his revolver. Five loads were still in its chambers, but what could he do with it against such terrible foes, and in the darkness, too?

He was a man who never gave up in anything. Better the embrace of these animals than a close contact with the Snake Devil.

A low growl sounded as the exclamation left his lips, and he realized that the two fierce animals were moving toward him. With a hand that was firm as a rock, despite his frightful situation, Coon-tail Bob aimed his revolver by intuition, as seeing was out of the question, and then pulled the trigger.

Twice, thrice he fired, and then he became aware that the animal had fallen. By the merest accident in the world—for Bob never claimed to have aimed—one of the bullets had entered the brute's eye, and pierced its brain.

The other grizzly gave a tremendous roar, and ambled forward. Two loads still remained in the weapon, and these the hunter delivered at short range, without any success whatever.

All that was now left to him, seeing that retreat was out of the question, was to draw his bowie, back up against the wall, and fight for all he was worth.

Before ten seconds had gone by man and bear were engaged in a desperate struggle. The most terrible and effective weapons of the grizzly lie in the long claws of the hind feet. One sweep of these will tear a man to pieces.

Again and again Coon-tail Bob plunged his knife into the fierce brute, avoiding punishment in return as much as possible; but he could not help being severely handled.

It would seem as though the animal had the ten lives of a cat. The hunter felt himself growing weaker, and believed death was coming to him. It was the grizzly that gave out first, however.

Coon-tail Bob tried to shout when his adversary fell across the first bear, but had not the strength. He tottered and lay upon the shaggy hide of the monster. The last he remembered was seeing a light appear, and the dark faces of Cortinas and his silver seekers bending over him.

CHAPTER XIII.

VALIANT LITTLE BUCKSKIN.

LITTLE BUCKSKIN was left alone upon the top of the cliff when his comrades went below. True, he had the Prairie Witch for company, but he was a very bashful little man, and blushed to the roots of his hair every time the young girl addressed a word to him, so out of pity she at length remained silent.

Perhaps there was another reason for her becoming quiet. Retiring to where a stone formed a rude seat, she seemed to be thinking deeply over something. What that was the reader will have to guess, as it would be rank treachery to reveal the thoughts of an innocent young girl, and especially when circumstances had thrown her into the company of a handsome young man—for so she considered our Roger—in such a singular manner.

Little Buckskin had at first, as the reader is already aware, rebelled against being left alone while his comrades faced danger and the excitement his soul craved.

This idea had been routed by the dulcet tones and flattering words of Colonel Jack, who had assured him most solemnly that his position might be the most dangerous of all, never realizing the truth of his words, and now the little hunter was proud of having been selected to guard the colonel's sister.

Time passed on.

The little hunter now and then took an observation of the valley, but could see next to nothing, though the moon shone brightly. Once he thought he heard the faint discharge of firearms, but it was so indistinct that he could not be sure.

This was Coon-tail Bob's doing, as has already been made manifest, the walls of the cavern in which he made his gallant fight deadening the sounds of the conflict.

Suddenly a clamor arose in the valley. There were pistol reports, loud cries, and all the attendant noises of a fearful conflict between two forces of men.

Little Buckskin was just about to spring to his feet in order to rush forward, forgetting that he could see nothing in the valley, when a human head made its appearance above the rock.

Nothing could be seen but the head, and it was

that of an Indian. To the amazement of the little ranger it seemed to move along the edge of the cliff as if a supernatural power sustained the mysterious head.

Even while he looked it vanished, and quickly reappeared further on. This time it was more than a head. A tall Indian leaped into view. It was the Snake Devil of the Apaches. He had actually climbed hand over hand up the rawhide rope from the ledge far below.

Probably he had found a small ledge near the top, and it was while making his way along this to find a better landing place, that had produced the mystery of the head.

There came a sound not unlike the hiss of his pets from the Apache. He had given a sudden start, for his eyes had fallen, first upon the Prairie Witch, and then her little protector. His eyes remained glued upon Little Buckskin, while his hand sought his waist for one of his deadly living missiles to throw.

Some men would have been entranced by that baleful glare, but Buckskin was not. The horror of the situation flashed upon him, but he did not quail.

His revolver was in his grasp in a twinkling, and even as the hand containing the rattlesnake was raised to hurl it, the sharp report of the weapon boomed out.

True to the aim of the marksman, the bullet pierced the brain of the terrible Apache. He gave a wild, shrill shriek, sprang into the air as if sent from a catapult, and then vanished from view, finding a grave in the valley that he had guarded so long and so faithfully.

Little Buckskin crept to the edge and looked down. Twenty feet below him a wretch was dangling upon the rope. When he saw the little ranger aim his revolver, he put up one hand as if to wave off the bullet, but there was a score to be settled between Buckskin and the Apaches; the remembrance of a terrible deed flashed through his mind, for which he held them all responsible, and he sent this dusky wretch whirling down to the pitiless rocks so far below.

By this time the fight in the valley had ceased, at least for the time being, and the little hunter wondered what it all meant.

That his comrades had been on one side he knew well enough, for he had heard the sharp reports of their rifles, but who could their opponents have been? Not Indians, for the appearance of that horrible demon on the top of the cliff, and the second wretch climbing up, told that the redskins were trying to escape from the valley in this strikingly bold manner even before the rumpus began.

There was one near him who knew, and the Prairie Witch was not long in communicating her knowledge to the brave little trapper who had been left to guard her and serve as her protector, although, armed with her bow, she feared no danger.

In some unaccountable manner the Mexican silver-seekers had not only escaped death from the double explosion, but they had also, after some research, found a means of entering the valley. That they had come across the rangers was evident, and doubtless the result was not very favorable to the Mexicans, seeing what foes they had to contend against.

Little Buckskin, finding that a pretty girl was not such a dreadful thing to face after all, soon found himself in earnest conversation with her, while they sat and listened to the sounds that came out of the valley from time to time.

Meanwhile the night was advancing, and as the moon sank beneath the great peaks to the southwest, the signal fires seemed to blaze up more fiercely than they had done before, as if the red men who were thus signaling, were becoming wilder as day drew near.

That they would see some pretty rough times before another night came on, Little Buckskin felt sure; how rough he had no adequate conception.

Slowly the darkness gave way to dawn. Objects that had erstwhile been swathed in gloom now cast aside their sable mantles and gradually became distinct.

Before the mist arose from out of the valley, Little Buckskin became aware that deadly danger menaced himself and his charge.

Dusky forms were dodging to and fro among the loose rocks at the foot of the little ridge on which they were situated. Evidently the Apaches who had been encamped at the foot of the mountains, and who had chased them with fire, had discovered him.

There was only one course to pursue; retreat was out of the question, and the valiant little ranger prepared to defend his rocky fort against the horde of red demons to the last.

CHAPTER XIV.

YELLOW-FANG GIVES THE CORONER A SUBJECT.

WHEN the rangers in the valley below discovered that their red foes, realizing their weakness, had retreated from the scene, they left the cliff, and began slowly and carefully moving forward.

Before long they came upon the brave whom Coon-tail Bob had slain as he ran, and some little time was spent in examining the corpse to ascertain what they could of the subsequent movements of their comrade.

Then once more the march, stealthy and noiseless as that of the velvet-footed panther, was taken up. While bending over the dead man, they had heard shouts and muffled shots, but every one seemed ready to swear that it came from a different direction, so that nothing reliable could be judged from this.

They had gone over two-thirds of the distance across the valley, when a strange, clanking noise was heard, which puzzled all of them at first. Even while they crouched in the bushes and listened, it became silent.

Old California Joe declared that if it was possible for Mexicans to be in the vicinity, then he would say the noise was caused by a pair of huge spurs striking on the rock; whereupon Roger Warden communicated to them the fact that Cortinas and his band of silver seekers were supposed to be cooped up inside the mountain, but that it was possible and even probable that they had escaped from their rocky dungeon and were even then in the silver valley.

This was all communicated in a low tone that could not have been heard ten feet away, but was readily understood by the four men who crouched around him.

It was speedily determined to move forward at any rate. Roger was especially eager for this, as he realized that they must be close to the spot, where, according to the manuscript left by his father, there lay a rude altar, formed of silver bricks left by the old Spaniards hundreds of years before, and which had been regarded in the light of the holiest of holies by the superstitious Apaches who had so zealously guarded the sacred valley for centuries.

That this was the exact truth he had learned from the young girl, who declared that the rude altar (kneeling around which the Apaches in the valley—with the seed of their Aztec ancestors still bearing fruit in certain strange customs—daily watched the rising of the sun above the rocky heights) was indeed formed of large bricks made of some dull metal, which might be silver for aught she knew.

Slowly the five men crept forward, and although the clanking sound had ceased, they could hear others that told them they were very near to a party of human beings.

"Demonio! do you still refuse to tell, dog of a Yankee? Remember it is death that stares you in the face!" cried an angry voice at this instant.

"Oh, go talk to your grandmother. I've faced death scores of times, and do you think I would scare worth a cent when I meet him again. I refuse ter tell whar them silver brick air. I sed az how I didn't touch 'em, but I take all that back. Now wat are you a going to do about it?"

"It's Coon-tail," whispered the colonel.

"And the other's Cortinas, the raider; let's move up, and be ready for work, comrades," said the man from New England, in low tones.

Again a voice reached their ears; it was the Mexican chieftain who spoke.

"You have sealed your doom; no earthly power can save you now. Come hither, Querdo," and he motioned to the coroner, who stood among the group, his blazing eyes fixed upon the face of the prisoner; "do as you will to your enemy, but be quick about it. Here lies much silver—all we can carry—and *carramba*, the sooner we are out of this country the better, for it will be swarming with red devils before another sunset."

The cowardly coroner had never expected to thus stand face to face with his deadly foe, for the picture so often in his mind of late had just reversed their present situations.

His whole face shone with devilish satisfaction, and the knife which was held aloft in his right hand trembled violently.

They stood face to face, these enemies who hated each other so bitterly.

From the eyes of the hunter there shone the gleam of outraged and helpless justice, while the bound stood before him unable to meet his glances.

"Thar's a reckoning for you yet, you scoundrel. My time may have come, but thar's jus-tice in Heaven, and you'll find it in this airth mebbe. I swore Yellow-Fang should tear your throat open, and avenge your victims. Strike! are you afraid to bury a knife in the heart of a defenseless prisoner. Strike, you wretch, and end the farce."

The yellow teeth of the coroner closed with a snap, and the taunting words of the hunter seemed to have imbued him with some degree of boldness, if such a quality was needed to do the work he contemplated.

The knife was drawn back for the fatal stab, and Blue Bill had already thrown his rifle to his shoulder with the intention of sending a bullet through the brain of the would-be assassin, when a mighty rushing sound was heard in the bushes close by.

Some object shot by them with the speed of a whirlwind, looking like a phantom wolf. At the same instant several peculiar whistles broke from the captive hunter, who had also heard the sound and guessed the cause.

It was Yellow Fang.

The dog had witnessed the descent of his master into the silver valley with no little uneasiness, and had looked over the edge a dozen times or more. Then, as if struck with an idea—if dogs are capable of reasoning, or prompted by instinct if they are not—he ran along the edge and vanished from the view of those upon the rock, who forgot all about him until the dog rushed into view with such swiftness.

How he had managed to get into the valley they could not even begin to guess, but he must have found a means somewhere, and as they afterwards ascertained, had tracked his master to the den of the grizzlies, and then to the silver altar, where the Mexicans had led their captive.

The animal had not been trained these many months for nothing. He was as eager as a bloodhound to get at the coroner, and like a rocket he flew through the air.

As the dog struck his breast, the ill-fated man went down in a heap. A shrill shriek broke from his lips, but it was choked in its utterance, and died away in a series of gurgling moans almost pitiful to hear.

"Tear him, Yellow Fang—tear him! Oh, this is a glorious sight! Julian, you are avenged. Rest in peace in your prairie grave, brother, you are avenged!" shouted Coon-tail Bob, who seemed to forget that in all probability his own life would expire with that of the wretch who was expiating his crimes then and there.

Cortinas yelled out some orders, and guns were raised, some being aimed at the hound, and others at his bound master. Just at this instant, however, the whip-like reports of several rifles rang out close by, and those who would have fired upon the dog of retribution rolled over like so many logs.

"*Carajo! los Americanos!*"

It was Cortinas who shouted out these words. He had seen the rifle barrels flashing in the moonlight just before the discharge, and had thrown himself among the bushes in time to avoid the bullet that was intended for his heart.

Those who were unharmed among the Mexicans hastened to seek shelter in the bushes, and it was at this juncture that daring Blue Bill sprang forward, with his knife clasped in his hand.

He was not crazy, or, if so, there was at least a method in his madness; but Blue Bill had no intention of assaulting the whole band of Mexicans single-handed.

He leaped to the side of the captive hunter, and by a few rapid passes of his hands cut his bonds. Coon-tail Bob instantly whistled to his dog, and the three hastened to leave their exposed position.

It was time, for already had the guns of the Mexicans, who had recovered somewhat from their fright, begun to sound, and the leaden messengers were whistling a lively tune about their ears.

One must have touched Yellow Fang in passing, for he stopped, and turning around, showed his teeth as he growled viciously, but a signal from his master caused him to follow.

This was the situation of affairs, but it was destined to be much more desperate before the rising of another sun, for both parties were fully determined, the one to defend the altar of silver bricks which they had found, the other to take it from them, while upon both was gathering the dark shadow of the Apache hordes.

CHAPTER XV.
EAGLE SLAYER'S LAST SHOT.

"LOSE no time, comrades, we must end this

now. If we give them an hour they will be off with all the silver."

So spoke the colonel, and there was not a man among his five comrades but knew he spoke the truth. Coon-tail Bob armed himself with some weapons contributed by his comrades, and then they moved carefully forward.

Such had been the excitement of that brief period that they did not really know that there was anything wrong upon the cliff, for the report of Little Buckskin's weapons had been mistaken for the echo of their own.

The Mexicans had not deserted the field by a long shot. Cortinas, the famous raider, was too daring a man to thus easily give up an object to which he had already devoted so much time and attention.

The six rangers came upon the silver seekers in a very few minutes. They were gathered about the altar of precious bricks. Their conversation could be plainly heard. Some were boasting that they had scared the enemy off, while others, more practical, were lifting the heavy silver bricks and calculating their value.

It seemed a pity to break in upon this pretty scene, but there was no help for it. Again the deadly report of the rifles rang out. This time, however, without waiting to see the result of their shots, they sprang forward, determined to carry the fight to closer quarters.

The Mexicans still outnumbered them two to one, but they were panic-stricken at first, and it was only the harsh voice of Cortinas that recalled them to a sense of their situation.

Tender-hearted Mose had been shot down, and the professor had a bullet somewhere within his corporate limits that prevented the active use of his limbs, and would probably be the cause of his death, if the blood continued to spout as it was then doing, as he leaped frantically about.

Texas was the only man left of the villainous set, whose acquaintance the colonel had formed in such a peculiar manner. Had the others still been alive, our friends would not have found such an easy victory.

As it was, Texas trusted to his legs, and bounded away. Not before doing some hard fighting however, and both old California Joe and Coon-tail Bob bore the marks of his terrible bowie upon their persons.

The Mexicans went down like sheep.

They had been demoralized at first, and by the time Cortinas had aroused something like courage among them, it was too late.

Cortinas saw this himself, and being discreet as well as daring, he concluded that there was a certain old Spanish proverb that was very appropriate to the present occasion, running: "He who fights and runs away, may live to fight another day."

Yes, he would live to fight another day, and avenge the death of his devoted men. As for the treasure, that must be abandoned for the present at least. If he could manage to get back in time across the border, he might raise some recruits and assault the Americans on their way to the fort, always providing they were lucky enough to escape the vengeance of the irate Apaches.

These thoughts flew through the active mind of the guerrilla like a flash, and watching his chance, he seized a fragment of a silver brick, and dodging in among the bushes, vanished from the scene.

Mexican Mose bore these yellow-faced cut-throats an old and deadly grudge. Many years before he had lost his wife at the hands of just such a band, and over her grave he made a solemn vow never to spare one of their hated race when the fortune of war placed him in a position to deal death and destruction.

He bore down upon them like a tearing avalanche, and once among the scared Mexicans, the old ranger seemed to be gifted with the power of twenty men.

The enemy melted away before the power of his revengeful arm, assisted by those of his comrades, and before Mose had had enough of the battle, all of the silver seekers were dead, except Cortinas and the man Texas, and they had vanished from the scene.

The treasure had been won.

There were wounds among them that needed attending to, but no one had been killed, and this was fortunate, considering that the Mexicans had outnumbered them over two to one in the start.

The work of the night was near over, and as every minute brought the danger that brooded over them closer, they could not lose any time.

Florence had told Roger of the other means of entering and leaving the valley, and had given him such a precise description of its location, that he was sure it could be readily found.

When she described the little green valley in-

to which the tunnel led, he had recognized it as the place where his comrade had been left together with the horses, early on this same night, while he searched for the entrance which his paper, the story of the old Spanish padre as related by his father, spoke of, not suspecting that they had camped close beside a similar hole.

So Roger and Blue Bill left the others and made for the wall by following up which they expected to come across the peculiar rock that guarded the opening of the mountain.

The moon was still shining, although well down in the western sky, and if anything, the peculiar milk-like fog in the valley had become denser; still one could see reasonably well for a short distance.

All unconscious of the blazing eyes fastened upon them, the two walked along the foot of the great cliff. A dark figure crouched in the bushes, and as they passed by, this form arose to his full height.

It was Eagle Slayer.

He was the last of the little band of Apaches, who, under the Snake Devil, had guarded the Silver Valley so well against the intruders.

In his hands the Indian held his bow, and an arrow, long and feathered, lay upon the cord. There was a sudden powerful movement of the red man's arms, and the shaft sped forward like a thunderbolt, and the string came against the wood with a sharp snap.

Up to this night Eagle Slayer had never been known to miss his aim. When he pulled the bow, a magnetism seem to draw the arrow direct to the target, and death followed.

Twice on this night had he sent a shaft without any result. This meant more to him than any one else, and with eager eyes he watched the effect of his third trial.

The arrow struck Roger in the side, or at least would have done so had he not providentially happened to carry his gun in such a way that the missile struck the stock and was deeply imbedded in it.

Eagle Slayer did not attempt to fly or hide himself, for when he saw that once more had his skill failed him, he felt aware that it meant his time had come.

Blue Bill wheeled instantly, and leveled his rifle. As the report rang out the Indian sank down in a heap without a moan, his life going out like a puff of smoke. Never again would his winged shaft bring the swift eagle down from the Heavens, for the Indian was dead.

Our friends soon found the passage and made their way out. In the little valley they found Roger's comrade with the pack mules that they had brought along, so great had been the confidence of young Warder in finding what he sought.

Roger and his friend entered, while Blue Bill went after the horses of himself and comrades, left in the gully when they ascended the great heights. It was almost daybreak when he got back. He reported seeing Cortinas and five men, one of whom was Texas, riding away, the four others being those left with the horses when their comrades entered the hole in the rock.

Fortune had not decided that they had yet seen the last of the guerrillas, however.

CHAPTER XVI.

GATHERING OF THE RED TIGERS.

LITTLE BUCKSKIN knew that he was in a desperate situation when he saw the red warrior ascending the height, but he gloried in his danger. Fortune was about to make amends for so cruelly cheating him out of the fight which had engaged his comrades of the silver valley.

He had no gun of his own—for the reader will remember that the little ranger's rifle was cremated in the fierce flames that came so near putting an end to his own existence, when they were racing for the *barranca*, but the weapon of Coon-tail Bob lay upon the rocks where the hunter had left it when starting upon his perilous expedition down the rope.

With this, and his ready revolvers, Buckskin prepared to resist the expected attack of the red man. Somewhat to his surprise, and greatly to his delight, the Prairie Witch took up a position at his side, with an arrow fitted to the string of her bow.

"I shall help you all I can. You are a brave man," she said, simply.

"Blazes!" muttered the little fellow, looking out of the corners of his eyes, "but ain't she a pretty one. And she called me a man, too. Thunder, maybe she's fallen in love with me. What shall I do? If I really thought that, I believe I would make way with her brother, and

that young fellow that was with her down in the silver valley. Little Buckskin, do ye jest show the gal what ye're made of, and she'll be dead gone."

The Indians were close at hand, so there was no more time for the hunter to let his conceit have play for once in his life. He threw the rifle to his shoulder, and blazed away.

The shot was fatal, as a howl of agony proved, but as if they had been waiting for just some such signal, the Apaches abandoned the shelter, and came rushing up from all quarters, yelling like mad, and leaping from side to side as if endeavoring to distract the attention of their enemy.

It was at this instant that the long rope began to vibrate as if some one was climbing up it, but neither Little Buckskin nor his companion noticed it, for they were too busy watching the foe, and using their weapons.

The revolver of the hunter rang out in quick detonations, and every bullet made its mark upon the foe. At the same time Florence sent shaft after shaft among them, but the Apaches seemed perfectly fearless, and continued the ascent in the face of death.

They were now close at hand, and the little hunter's revolver was empty. Not alarmed in the least, he drew his long bowie, and prepared to grapple with the first redskin who attempted to gain the fort.

Nothing loth to finish the battle at close quarters, the Apaches rushed forward.

Another minute and all would have been over, for left alone to withstand the rush of a dozen furious Indians, the little hunter would have gone down like a weed before the wind.

Just at this critical moment a dark form came crawling over the edge of the rock. It was Old California Joe. He had accomplished the same feat that had cost the Snake Devil so dear, and was on hand just in the nick of time.

Giving a savage war cry, he sprang forward to the side of the brave little hunter.

When the old sharpshooter fired he generally sent death with his bullets, and as the sharp detonation of his revolver rang out again and again, the Apaches came to a halt as though aghast at the terrible havoc made in their ranks, and then turning, dashed down the hill in the wildest disorder, showing about as much agility in retreating as they had in advancing.

It was very fortunate that the old ranger had come just when he did, or it would have been too late to have saved Little Buckskin from death, and the Prairie Witch from a captivity that was almost as bad.

It was the desire of the party that all of them should unite in the valley, for the horses were there, loaded with the precious silver bricks, and ready for the homeward trip.

Florence was a fearless girl, and she readily consented to the plan proposed by the old hunter. They lowered her carefully with the rope. Many a man would have turned sick with fear to have found himself dangling so far from the earth, but she showed no signs of such an emotion, and was successfully lowered to her friends below.

Then the little hunter went down, and it was a mystery how old Joe was to get both himself and the rope to the bottom.

He solved this readily enough.

Drawing up the line he doubled it, and then passed it around a firm rock.

In this way he was enabled to lower himself a third of the way down the cliff. Securing a good resting-place, he pulled the rope down, and the maneuver was repeated. This time the ranger reached the ledge where Roger and Florence had crouched during the earlier part of the night, after the escape of the young man from the terrible death to which the cruel Apaches would have left him.

From this point it was an easy matter to reach the ground by the aid of the long rope, and in a very short time old California Joe was with his friends.

There was no time to be lost.

The Apaches had not as yet discovered their absence from the rock, but were liable to at any minute. Besides, the hordes of fierce warriors, drawn by the fire signals, would soon be upon the spot, and if our friends were caught in this valley, then good-by to all their chances of escape.

They had secured all of the precious silver bricks, and fastened them in the bags provided for that purpose, over the backs of the horses. They were human, and could not resist the temptation of loading the animals with all they could conveniently carry, intending to walk most of the time themselves.

This greed came very near costing them dear in the end.

All being now in readiness, they left the silver valley behind them, and entered the passage that was to lead them to the outer world.

Old Joe brought up the rear.

At the mouth of the passage he came to a halt, and looked back. Over the top of the tall cliffs on the other side, he could see the three separate black smokes arising, and even as he looked they assumed a more compact and denser form, as though the fires had been suddenly merged into one.

This meant that the Apache horde was in sight. The danger was imminent then.

Even as the ranger looked, several forms appeared upon the spot which had so lately been occupied by Little Buckskin and Florence. Outlined against the clear sky, their flowing hair and singular trappings proclaimed them Apaches.

They looked in wonder upon the valley. Then they appeared to catch sight of him, for he saw them pointing, after which, with wild gesticulations, they vanished from view.

"They'll be after us like hot cakes. We're going to see trouble yet before getting out of this scrape, but let it come; our old comrade is avenged, and Don Pablo will go wild when he hears that we almost wiped out the whole of that infernal band. Listen to those yells far away over the hills. Thunder! I believe we've stirred up the whole Apache nation. If they once get around us, we're gone coons!" muttered Joe, as he hastened on to rejoin his comrades.

Ay, let those red fiends once surround you, and all the powers of evil could not prevent them from drinking your blood.

CHAPTER XVII.

COLONEL CRAWFORD'S MYSTERIOUS FOE.

CHANGE the scene.

The sun is going down again in the west, and our friends are some miles away from the silver valley. A day's journey makes a great change in the aspect of the country. No longer do the cliffs rear their lofty heads hundreds of feet above the heads of the travelers. Even the hills have become much smaller in size, and are covered with dense patches of trees.

It has been thought advisable to keep close to this range, for should they make out straight upon the prairie, they can be easily seen by the Indians and followed without any trouble.

Strangely enough, Cortinas and his badly demoralized little band came to this same conclusion, and took this same route several hours before the rangers.

Where are they now?

What means that head seen above a wooded mound just in advance of our friends? It is almost instantly withdrawn, but surely it betrayed the Mexican headgear.

In their retreat the badly used-up band of silver-seekers have come upon the hunchback, El Demonio and the senor, who are just starting, after dinner, along the trail of the colonel among the low foothills bordering the prairie.

An explanation on each side reveals the fact that their interests are in common. They resolve, therefore, to act in concert.

It is very probable that the successful silver hunters, in making their retreat from the valley, will choose this route as the safest, until Buenaventura river is reached, when they will probably turn down its bank and make for the fort.

What can be more simple than an ambuscade at this point? They can readily dispose of the whole party, and then run off with the treasure. *Cospita!* it is a pretty plan and cannot help working well.

They decide to try it and set about securing a location. Cortinas remembers how some other plans equally as simple in theory have turned out to be a network of disasters when attempted in reality, and he resolves to make sure of escape by having his horse ready.

It is past noon when the coalition is formed. For hours they lie ambushed. Then keen eyes, sharpened by hate, discover the advance of our friends. It is the senor who has seen them. His black eyes snap fire, and his gritted teeth tell how he glories in the near prospect of slaying Colonel Crawford, the man for whom he entertains such a deadly hatred.

All is now in readiness.

Like so many wolves they crouch in readiness to slay their victims who are momentarily drawing nearer. The eyes of the silver-seekers fall upon the heavily-laden steeds, and they sparkle with avariciousness.

Nearer comes the party. In the advance rides

Old California Joe. His keen eyes are ever on the alert, and by the merest accident in the world discover that head thrust above the elevation.

Like a flash the whole truth comes into his brain, and he realizes that they are about to fall into ambush.

A few words, hastily spoken, serve to inform his comrades of the danger that yawns before them. An immediate halt is made.

The Mexicans, growing impatient for the fun to begin, peep cautiously over the top of the mound again. They are too far away to distinguish matters fully but it is evident that those whom they would slay have come to a halt, and seem to be making preparations for camping.

This strikes the dull-witted Mexicans as a little singular, remembering, as they do, what terrible enemies must be upon the trail of the little band, but they suspect nothing, and even nudge each other, thinking how much easier their task will be, as they can now crawl up under cover of the gathering darkness, pour in a deadly volley, and then decamp, bearing with them the treasure horses.

Oh! if these deluded fools had only known the truth. Cortinas is not so sure of the matter, and El Demonio moved uneasily several times, but even they are caught napping.

Through the long grass five human forms are crawling in a line, looking like some monstrous serpent, for each man is close at the heels of the preceding one.

Noiselessly they make the circuit, keeping in close cover all the while. A flock of crows upon a neighboring tree crane their necks and caw in wonder, much to the disgust of the old rangers, who imagine the game is up, but their enemies are either too dull of comprehension, or else their eyes and senses are completely engrossed with Little Buckskin, Florence, Roger and the horses, who seem to be making ready the camp.

Now the five men have gained a point directly in the rear of the ambuscade, and can see those forming it plainly. They seem to be eager to use their guns, judging from their nervous manner of handling them.

At the side of Coon-tail Bob crouches his faithful dog, Yellow Fang, and he is savage to get at the scoundrels; his eyes are glued upon them, and every muscle seems set for action.

Some sound must have reached the hidden party, for just now one of them—Texas himself—looks around. He springs to his feet, with an oath, seeing that all is lost, and aims his revolver.

The rest quickly follow his example, but as the five rifles sounded, four of them sink back never to rise again. Texas is one of them. He attempts to struggle up, but Yellow Fang leaps at his throat and bears him back.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"HELL HATH NO FURY LIKE A WOMAN SCORNED."

CORTINAS makes a flying leap through the air, lands on one of the horses, and dashes out upon the prairie, bending low in the saddle. Old Joe has charged his rifle with marvellous rapidity, and just as the famous Mexican raider is congratulating himself on his chances of escape, the long weapon of the California sharpshooter cracks. You see the steed come to a sudden halt, and the Mexican is sent flying through the air.

When he reaches the ground he lies perfectly quiet, and they feel sure he is dead. Perhaps it would be better for a harassed border if they should go out, and make sure, for Cortinas is a cunning man.

Other events of an exciting nature claim their attention. The senor has vanished from the scene, but as Colonel Crawford bends over *El Demonio*, who lies doubled up, to see what strange specimen of humanity the object may be a form creeps up behind him, and the glimmer of a deadly blade is seen in the air.

As it is in the act of descending, the sharp report of a pistol breaks upon the air.

The senor whirls around, and clutching blindly at the air, falls to the ground with a shrill scream. Coon-tail Bob, who has fired, leaps to the spot and bends over the dying senor.

"Heaven forgive me," he cries, "I have shot a woman!"

Colonel Crawford heard the words fall from the lips of the hunter, and there was something that brought him to the spot.

The pretended senor had struggled up, one hand supporting the heavy body, the other concealed under the embroidered jacket. The broad

rimmed hat had fallen off, and a mass of luxuriant black hair swept the ground.

As the evening light fell upon the face, it showed beautiful curves, but where supreme loveliness had sat enthroned, the light of passion and the agony of coming death had left their blighting touch. They had done their work well, for it was the face of a demoness.

"Donna Isadore Carmen Cordova! what does this mean?" exclaimed the soldier.

The hunchback had been right in his suspicions so far as they went, but they had not gone far enough to hit the truth.

"It means that since the day you scorned my love, soldier, my hate has been as strong as was the other passion. When I realized to what humiliation I had been brought by your public refusal to wed me, I swore by everything holy to hunt you to your death. You have suspected it long ere this. My attempts failed in Mexico. I learned of your getting leave to make a search for your sister—I put men on your track, and came myself to make sure. This is the end, I am dying—dying. Never more to see dear Mexico. For that I care little, but oh! the misery of ending my life at your feet."

"Misguided girl," said the soldier, in pity, "I never sought your love, and it is no fault of mine that you are here. Still from my heart I pity you."

"You know not how a woman can hate, soldier. But it is over now. You pity me, pity me. Bend closer and tell me that you forgive me. Ha!"

As the soldier leaned down, being upon his knees, something flashed in the last gleam of the daylight. Coon-tail Bob jerked the colonel rudely back, just in time to save his life, for the dagger that wounded his arm was intended for his heart.

"What a sarpint she is!" exclaimed the old ranger, in holy horror.

The woman sank back with the look of a baffled fiend convulsing her features.

"Foiled! Ah, if I could only have seen him die before I drew my last breath, I would have been content. But hark! how the earth trembles as though in the throes of death. You are not safe yet. They come—they come! The Apaches are upon you!" and with this wild cry bubbling from her lips, the woman who had been a victim to her own passion, fell back.

It was indeed true.

Her hearing, rendered more than ordinarily acute by her dying condition, and the closeness of her ears to the ground, had caught the sounds before either of the men, but now they could hear a distant sound.

Coon-tail Bob threw himself upon the ground, and in a few seconds sprang erect again, wild with excitement.

"They're coming, true as gospel, colonel, troops an' troops of 'em. I reckon wehev the whole Apache nation at our heels."

"Then not a second must be lost. Seize upon these horses. They will serve us well, as ours are weary. Haste, friends, or all is over."

They did hasten.

There was need of it, too, for with each passing second the terrible thunder of hoofs came louder to their ears.

The six horses that fell into their hands by reason of the recent victory were hastily mounted. Little Buckskin and Florence remained upon their own horses, which were but lightly laden with the treasure.

Away they went, tearing along the level land at the foot of the hills. The Apaches had now heard the chase, and knew that their intended prey was just ahead of them. A terrific chorus of savage yells arose, that seemed to make the welkin ring. A man crouching upon the prairie, behind his wounded horse, heard it, and threw himself flat in a crevice until the horde of warriors had swept by, when he arose and ran with the speed of the wind across the open land.

It was the guerrilla, Cortinas.

Like a tornado our friends swept onward mile after mile, yet ever after them came that ceaseless pounding.

Their horses commenced to show signs of fatigue, but there was no thought of giving up the mad race yet. On—on they galloped, leading the animals bearing the treasure for which they had risked so much.

Colonel Crawford happened to be mounted upon the splendid animal that the mysterious senor had ridden, and he could easily have made his escape at any time, but such a thought never once entered his mind. They would live or die together.

The sounds from the rear had gradually decreased in volume as numbers of the Apaches, finding their steeds blown, turned out and dis-

continued the race; but there was still enough who persistently followed, to crush them out of existence with a blow.

They kept up the fight with a persistency that at least merited success, but it only angered more the fiends who pursued. Their yells grew hoarser and fiercer in tone, as if indicating what the fate of those they chased would be when the end, which was inevitable, came.

The moon was now rising.

Above the eastern horizon the fair mistress of the night came, wheeling upward in her passage, and with one end chipped off so that she no longer resembled a round silver dollar, but rather a coin of Caesar's time, when a corner was mutilated in order that the piece should be of the right weight.

The scene disclosed was just what our friends had surmised. Their enemies were gaining upon them, and numbered over fifty warriors. They were crazed with fury at the bold actions of the silver seekers in entering the sacred valley, and not only carrying off the treasure that lay there, but the young girl whom they revered as a being in communication with the sun.

So incensed were the Apaches at this double outrage, that they would not have hesitated to follow the little party into the very gates of the fort, had they been able to reach it.

In front of them our friends saw the belt of timber bordering the river, and toward it they urged their tired steeds. If it came to the worst, they could defend themselves here and take life for life.

Nearer they drew, and at length the little cavalcade dashed into the timber.

The Apaches were not far behind, and uttering renewed cries, they came on like a storm-cloud, determined to sweep the whites off the earth like so much dust.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

A STREAM of fire running along the edge of the timber belt, the roar of many carbines, and the storm of death-dealing bullets in their ranks is the first intimation the ill-fated Apaches have that they have run into an ambuscade.

Before the remnant of the furious band can recover from the panic into which they have been thrown, a body of horsemen bursts out from the green and brown frondage, and passing over the half-withered grass, comes down upon them with the swoop of the eagle.

It is the blue-coats.

Heaven has kindly heard the prayer that has been welling up from the hearts of the fugitives, and guided them to where several companies of Uncle Sam's cavalry are quartered, whom Colonel Crawford, when he has time to look around him, will recognize as his own brave men.

The Indians are entirely cut to pieces by the cavalry charge. Only a few manage to escape death by secreting themselves in the grass, and they afterward carry the story to their comrades.

It is decided by our friends not to delay longer than can be helped. Their valiant defenders only number one hundred, all told, and if the savage herds whom the signal fires brought so quickly to the vicinity of the silver mines, once surround them and cut off retreat, they might as well give in, for there will be no chance of escape though they may die like heroes.

So, after a short rest, which those whom the Apaches have chased so long, really need, they once more take up the march, heading down the river.

Colonel Crawford rides alone.

Of all the company he is the only one who shows signs of sadness. Thoughts are in his mind connected with the poor girl whose passions had brought her to such a terrible fate, but the soldier was perfectly innocent of wrong in the matter. She was a Spanish beauty, an heiress whom he had met in Mexico and to whom he had paid no more attention than any lady would receive at his hands. She had fallen desperately in love with him—but what need is there to repeat the sad story. Poor Donna Isadore Carmen Cordova would never be heard of again, and as time rolled on the soldier often gave a sigh in memory of the one who was so fair and yet so false to the delicacy of her sex.

If a pursuit is made by the Apache hordes, our friends do not know it, for they gain the fort without seeing a hostile Indian.

Excitement reigns supreme when it is known that the mythical silver mine of the old Spaniard's has not only been found, but robbed of its precious treasure.

From the body of Texas, Roger had recovered

ed the missing papers which he stole from him in company with Arizona while he stopped at a tavern in a Missouri town, with what result, the reader who has been interested in our narrative will readily remember. The ill-starred Arizona had met his fate by the savage hands of the regulators, and his more fortunate companion only delayed his time of transit for a period.

There is not much more to tell.

We have seen our friends through their terrible dangers, and witnessed some of the most remarkable feats of daring that ever made the southwestern border ring.

The fact that Cortinas lives to-day, the greatest guerrilla and revolutionist of the Rio Grande, is proof conclusive that the cunning Mexican escaped. He never told the story of his terrible disaster, but groans every time he thinks how

that silver treasure slipped through his fingers.

Go with me to the finest part of the Lone Star State. There, upon one of the largest and best cultivated farms, you will find our Roger Warde. Florence, whom we have known as the Prairie Witch, is his wife. How could it be otherwise, after that greeting she gave him in the silver valley, when he was mistaken for her brother Jack.

The colonel is somewhere on the border, or was the last I heard of him, which was almost six months ago. He will never marry, he says, and avoids ladies as much as possible, but he is the finest fellow I have ever met, and every one who knows Colonel Crawford intimately will say the same thing.

Roger's partner went back to Boston with his share of the spoils. What became of him no one

knows, but doubtless the spirit daring enough to venture where he did, could not fall short of success in anything he undertook.

Poor Coon-tail Bob has gone under. Peace to the ashes of the old hunter. Yellow Fang died upon his master's grave.

Little Buckskin, Blue Bill, Mexican Mose, and the old Californian sharpshooter appeased the hankering after revenge by Don Pablo, by relating the terrible doom that had befallen the men who had ruined his home, and refusing all reward, set sail for the northwest, where they will be found to-day.

Brave to the core, with hearts as big as pumpkins where good deeds are concerned, the outlaws of the border hate them like poison, but at the same time they fear the deadly rifles of those whose fortunes we have followed in their hunt for scalps along the silver trail.

[THE END.]

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